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31 SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND.

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THE ILL-TEMPERED COUSIN.

A NOVEL.

BY

FRANCES ELLIOT,

AUTHOR OF 'DIARY OF AN IDLE WOMAN IN SPAIN,'
'THE RED CARDINAL,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON : F. V. WHITE & CO.,
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TO MY FRIEND
MRS ELLICOTT,
WITH
THE AUTHOR'S LOVE.

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THE ILL-TEMPERED COUSIN.

CHAPTER I.



FIFTY years ago at Twickenham !
Dear old place ! No steamers, no
trains, no telegraphs ! Blessed
time !

So long ago—I seem to have seen it as
Pope saw it—from his lawn-spread villa on
the Thames, when laced upright in a stiff
canvas bodice, asthmatic and tottering, an
old man at forty, he was rowed on the
river, or rambled on the banks, his dog
Bounce after him, decorated his shell
grotto,—approached by what Swift called
the *Ars Poetica*,—and turned and twisted
his garden-domain of five acres into

park-like lawns and green alleys ;—a brilliant circle round him—Arbuthnot, Gay, Swift, Oxford, Bolingbroke, Peterborough, Kneller, and fair-faced Hervey ; the ladies, from the Court at hand at Richmond—Lady Suffolk, ‘youth’s youngest daughter, sweet Lepell,’ to become Lady Hervey ; Miss Bellenden, and ‘lovely Montagu,’—in reality a hard-headed, keen-witted, remorseless woman ; good Mrs Hannah Blount, successor to her sister Teresa, bringing up the rear, neither handsome nor clever,—making tea and pickles, and keeping off smarter dames.

And the great little earl was of Twickenham too, receiving carriage-company at Strawberry Hill, trooping down the London Road in fine coaches, and chariots painted sky-blue and pale yellow ; the ladies all hoops, feathers, patches, and rouge ; the gentlemen dandies of the Macaroni Club, in silk and velvet—not without a suspicion of rouge also ;—he laughing at them all the time, and ‘taking the roof off their houses,’ like the *Diable boiteux*.

Another neighbour in those classic days, Sir Joshua Reynolds, now in his speaking-trumpet period, with his sister, gentle Miss

Reynolds, inhabiting another famous house—on *The Hill* next to the ‘Star and Garter’—of which not a brick is altered,—the same house where Garrick sat for his portrait, dressed as Richard the Third, in a bag wig, gold-laced coat and satin tights,—Gibbon tapped his gold-mounted snuff-box,—and Goldsmith—‘Gentle Oliver’—arrived to dine in the immortal plum-coloured coat and yellow waistcoat; not a penny in his pocket, but, all the same, hopeful and smiling, babbling about ‘Turnham green peas’ at Brentford, and making everyone laugh consumedly.

Burly Doctor Johnson also, ‘like a thunder-cloud in motion,’ sauntering through the Twickenham meadows, in a Rhadaminthine sort of way, to visit the noble trifler, Horace Walpole; and the great Philip Earl of Chesterfield, passing through the long lanes in his coach-and-six, a splendid apparition, attended by his valet, Dayrolles—for the earl is old and infirm, and fears to take the air unattended.

The swans had the river all to themselves, savagely ready to attack all comers as the current carries them softly onwards past dits and islands of osier beds and water-lilies, by fleets of pleasure-boats,

gay with pennons and flags ; the country—real country, with great emerald spaces and fine clumps of elms between the far-off houses, thickening a little near the Thames ; Twickenham itself, a straggling, old-fashioned village, grouping around a stone-towered church as old as the Henrys, with a large yew at hand higher than the tower, up which a flag is run on royal birthdays, and on the fifth of November to spite the Papists. The yew-tree shading both church and grave-yard reverently from the road, a pathway of shining pebbles leading to the porch, furnished with wooden benches ; good sittings on Sundays, as the old men knew who frequented it, for they can come and go as they like, in shabby clothes, which would be a disgrace inside. The interior much endeared to the vulgar mind by whitewash, diversified with black and yellow stripes, large hatchments, with gaudy coats-of-arms, and carved monuments painted round with deep lines of colour ; also high-backed pews, with green curtains on brass rods, within which sleep becomes a duty.

Near the church stood the inn—‘The Red Lion’—set forth by a flaunting sign-board that sways to and fro in high winds,

and creaks in frosty weather. In front, posters ready harnessed for the 'Lightning' coach, running between London and Portsmouth, and for all chaises or chariots passing on the road, the horses held by broken-down post-boys, small and wisened, with bowed legs far apart by reason of the saddle, wearing battered jockey-caps, and ragged hunting coats, fastened by pins or string, over patched knee-breeches and what had once been top-boots, out of which toes protrude very apparently; nondescripts, who wipe their mouths with the inside of their hands to remind you of drink, and touch their jockey-caps with a curled palm, suggestive of halfpence, but who can swear and tittle like their betters, and kick the poor horses when no one is looking.

Before the open door stands Mr Horrocks, the landlord, his hands in his pockets, and a short pipe between his teeth, his right leg and foot well forward, as one who says, 'I am master—deny it who can.'

'Here, Jim, you blackguard'—(this is his style of language, addressed to the oldest and most decrepit of the 'Boys'),—'that near 'oss is not groomed. Do it properly, or I'll give you the lash!' And he slashes his hunting-crutch fiercely in Jim's

face, who cowers before him like a cur, and, horse in hand, rushes into the stable.

Only two doors off is the 'General Warehouse,' where groceries and chat are dealt out in equal quantities, by thriving Mr Marshall and his two sons. Near it again a haberdashery kept by the pensive Widow Blake, in well-worn weeds.

But the gem of the village is the lollipop shop of Dame Jodders, famed far and wide for her hard-bake. No stranger to Twickenham passes by that road without entering her little parlour, with straw chairs, and a Bible laid on a worsted mat on a table near the lattice-window.

As visitors appear, she emerges from a back-door leading to the washhouse, a black bonnet tilted over her nose, and iron spectacles,—her skirts pinned up, and her hands white and furred with soap-suds ;—always a mossy smell about her suggestive of a pump, and drops of water falling to the floor.

'Wonderful fine hard-bake,' she says to her customers, in monologue, giving her bonnet a shove forward as she proceeds, in primitive fashion, to break the squares with her fingers. 'Wonderful! I sends he to King at Windsor. A-sends down a coach-

and-four, a' does, on purpose to fetch he all hisself. The Queen's Majesty and the Princesses eats he—they do rarely. Queen says, says she, "George" (that's the old King), "here's your hard-bake." He says, says he, a - kissing on her so purty, "Thank'ee, my dearie—can't live without my hard-bake nohow." (They eats a lot a' do at the castle!) Says the Queen, "Nothing in the 'varsal world like Jodder's hard-bake. Rest is cheats!" Awdacious! I had he 'prisoned,' Dame Jodder adds, with a grin,—'took up and 'prisoned for counterfit. King a' helped me. 'A got seven year, a' did, at the 'sizes at Windsor town, all for he!'

She points to the pile of hard-bake in the window. For us she had taken down a tin canister, labelled 'snuff' in large painted letters. Then dropping our pence into a little slit in the deal table, where they clink against each other, conveying visions of treasure, we depart. . . .

Turning off to the left from the highroad, past the village, a blind lane ends abruptly in a handsome lodge and a smart gate; on both sides bordered by high walls, so darkened by damp and mildew, and the mortar crevices so filled with moss, that the original colour of the bricks has alto-

gether faded out. Above fall shadows from lofty elms — the roughly-barked branches stretching across the road, and almost meeting overhead. Inside, hedges of laurel wild and scraggy for want of trimming, and here and there a pointed cypress, shooting up in rank luxuriance, overtops the walls.

The road is gloomy and ill-kept ; leaves fly about in the wind, and cover the straggling footpaths, winding in and out among the coarse grass on either side, at intervals broken by other ornamented gates, opening upon gravel drives enshrouded in banks of evergreen, each gate the entrance to some choice villa or mansion, rarely recognisable, except by an elevated stack of chimneys.

Further down to the right, a green door opens upon a tall, gaunt, Queen Anne house, presenting itself to the eye with a certain vulgar freshness, very different from the bashful seclusion of the modern villas shrouded in veils of shrubbery and shade.

The Queen Anne house, with high, narrow windows filled with small, square panes of glass like eyes without eyelashes, and an unporched door flattened against the brick walls, is approached by a double

flight of stone steps, with iron ramps, clearly curtailed of their just proportions, and narrowed into absolute meanness. The smallest projection or angularity on the façade would be a relief, but there is none—not a creeper, not a vagrant trail of ivy, nor a morsel of lichen to break the bewildering lines of glaring mortar,—only between the windows of the first and second floors a stone lozenge, with a head representing a hard-featured Roman emperor—Cæsar, perhaps, or Tiberius; the date of the house, 1712, and the name ‘Scatlands,’ produced in black paint on a lozenge under the Roman head.

Scatlands stands north and south,—protecting gardens compass it about, keeping back the wind, but concealing the the river—only visible from the second storey on a level with the stone lozenge. The river, and the laughing meadows beyond, fading away along the banks into a bosky pleasaunce of parks, groves, and thickets.

Quiet and silent is the high-walled garden, divided by formal gravel walks, cut symmetrically. But nature is never unsightly. The brown earth shines rich with borders of delicate-leaved box; dusky

wallflower and late stocks ; and silver lavender basks merrily in the November sun, striking warm upon the protecting walls—covered with apricot, pear, and plum,—each little branchlet stretched to its utmost limit by the gardener's skill, like a gigantic fan. Even the crumpled cabbage, and the sweet-smelling pot-herbs and purple broccoli bear a certain beauty, as do the espaliers (neatly bordering the walks leading towards a dark exit on the further side into the meadows), trained in lines as symmetrical as mediæval iron work.

Between Scatlands and the river stands another house called 'Rosebank,' one of those modern villas enshrouded in greenery, and looking as bright as paint and varnish can make it.

Unlike its aged neighbour, Rosebank has no one point of view that corresponds with the other.

There are carved gables ; turrets with conical tops encasing spiral stairs ; quaint recesses in a line with green verandahs ; projecting porches and mullioned windows ; scripture texts carved in gaily-painted characters ; coats-of-arms and supporters, all in bright colours, ramping side by side with castellated doorways and glass conservatories.

Some remote idea of warlike encounters must have been simmering in the brain of the Cockney architect (returned probably from the enticement of a Scotch trip) and caused him to endow his creation with a character of combativeness, highly diverting in a dwelling rising peacefully out of geranium beds, on a lawn sloping gently to the Thames. Still the building made '*figura*,' as the Italians say, and was much admired by those who entertained obscure ideas upon national defences: the warlike character intensified by a toy cannon mounted on a swivel, placed with its mouth facing the front door!

Somehow, although not half so high as Scatlands, Rosebank absorbed all the sunshine, the air, and the brightness—to say nothing of the river which glided under the emerald lawn, like a diamond coil.

To look down on it from the upper storey of Scatlands, was like a glimpse out of Purgatory into Paradise. As much as it was possible for one house to mock another, Rosebank *did* mock its aged neighbour.

'Get out of my way, you old thing!' the villa seemed to say. 'Get out of my way! I am strong, and young, and comely, and you are old, and bald, and grim! The sun

woos me, and rests on me ; the river loves me, and ripples to me softly on summer nights ; the birds sing to me in spring—the rooks caw to me politely, telling me when day breaks in the east. Primroses and violets waft to me their choicest perfumes, and the first snowdrop lifts up its white head to salute me ! Get out of my way, you bleared old thing ! Don't cumber the ground with your red face and white patched eyes ! Of what use are you ? Who cares for you ? Go away !'





CHAPTER II.

AT Rosebank lived Mr and Mrs Maitland, with their only son Edward, and Miss Sterne, Mrs Maitland's companion.

The Queen Anne house, with the tall small-paned windows, was inhabited by Mr and Mrs Winter, with no children at all. They never had any.

Mrs Winter—universally known as 'Aunt Amelia'—was a small, thin, little woman, very much inclined to stoop,—with a singularly gentle voice, which matched with her soft face, and kind, caressing manners. A faded blonde was Mrs Winter, whose once rosebud complexion had long toned down to the colour of old ivory. Fine wrinkles had early gathered on her delicate skin,—the golden hue had early gone from her hair—still silky and abundant, though

slightly streaked with grey, hidden away under a cap of soft white lace, trimmed with pale pink ribbons.

Those pale pink ribbons, and a certain aromatic perfume of dried rose leaves which surrounded her like an atmosphere, were the only legends time had left of her youthful charms,—the only vanity of which she was guilty.

Poor Aunt Amelia! the cap and its pale pink ribbons, and the perfume of roses, were each palpable in their different ways; but who can describe the kindly blue eyes that brightened with ready sympathy towards every living creature, the exquisite delicacy of touch, the gentle, modulated voice and benevolent eyes? One always thought of her as young. Some natures never age. There is left in them some touch of virginal charm—like the freshness of autumn woods, in the coolness of early dawn, bringing out summer shadows long after the warmth has passed. It was in this sense one never thought of her as old. Her little vanities of dress, intense in their simple refinement, her unconscious feminine ways, had much of the flavour of youth about them. Not a vessel of strength Aunt Amelia! Cer-

tainly not! She never had been at any time; and assuredly was not now, after many ups and downs, and long years of care and suffering.

These uncertainties and ups and downs, referable to the conduct of her husband, Mr Louis Winter, who, from his earliest youth, had never been able to keep a shilling in his pocket. Nor did he possess that fine sense of *meum* and *tuum* that can bear the investigation of creditors. Not that he meant to be dishonest. Oh, no! His motives and his actions were always—as expounded by himself in broken English (Mr Winter was a German)—exalted even to self-sacrifice. Indeed, to hear him talk, you would have imagined that he would, long ago, have accumulated a vast fortune, but for the impecuniosity of his friends.

Always, in speaking of his affairs, he used a neuter pronoun, and this had become such a habit, that I doubt if he did, in fact, realise that his losses were the consequence of his own culpable imprudence. On no occasion had he ever acknowledged his own responsibility. Indeed Mr Winter had lived upon delusions all his life, and would continue to

live on them till his death. They suited him.

At the best of times he had reckoned upon chance, which, in a merchant, is dangerous, and speculated in every new venture—ventures indeed presenting apparently no other inducement than their novelty—in a way utterly bewildering to the business mind.

Money was money to Mr Winter wherever he found it. Whose money it was mattered little. His powers of appropriation were unlimited (always with the idea, be it noted, of benefiting his creditor by returning cent. per cent. for the sums he borrowed). In this way he would have robbed his father, his mother, or his own child, had he possessed one. His closest friends he *had* robbed so often, that the time had come when their purse-strings were closed hermetically.

Nor did he thank them! Had he succeeded, he told himself, he, Louis Winter, would have made them rich. He had not succeeded, and to repay them, under the circumstances, was not obviously to be expected.

Besides his business ventures on the Stock Exchange, Mr Winter, full of elegant tastes, and the most refined artistic

proclivities in china, pictures, sculpture, and bric-à-brac, invested in these articles whenever and however occasion offered, in a manner most damaging to his credit. Rarely were these acquisitions paid for. They were accepted by him airily—on speculation—to be resold. If he did not effect a resale, the proprietors found themselves most thankful to have them returned. If he sold them, they were still more thankful to receive a portion of the price. But, as Mr Winter's name as a *connoisseur* was supposed to confer an additional value on the 'objects' he possessed, he invariably found ready victims.

Thus Aunt Amelia passed her life in a bitter mockery of apparent wealth, inexpressibly aggravating amid the real poverty with which she struggled. Often and often would she burst into tears as she looked round on the tables and consoles, which, as well as the walls of her drawing-room (whenever she possessed one), were invariably crowded with the rarest enamels, bronzes, pottery, and porcelain, the walls ablaze with priceless pictures and original sketches by great masters.

Meek as she was, she always opposed

the advent of fresh valuables into the house. She would have deemed it disloyal to her husband to reason out logically the cause of her opposition, but she did, in a vague manner, admit to her secret self that these things were not his ; that he sold them nevertheless ; and that by some mysterious process money was for a time unaccountably plentiful.

At this she wept bitter tears. She remonstrated—even more—as far as it was in her, she became violent, and threatened to leave the house. In vain !

‘ *Meine goot Amalie,*’ Mr Winter would say, embracing her fervently. ‘ *Z’ee ees di letel fools. Zee no ferstand noting at all. Es ees der Louis dat is vise. Let he alone. Vid ees littel eye ee do goots to all.*’

After this he would flourish his red silk handkerchief in the air, like a banner of victory ; then suddenly remembering its legitimate purpose, blow his nose violently, finally leading off Aunt Amelia to the piano, where, by the aid of his silver-mounted flute, leading the melody to her accompaniment—for she was a charming musician—all their troubles were forgotten.

Louis Winter was the younger son of a most respectable Jewish family in Frankfurt. He had been trained in perfect habits of technical mercantile knowledge—he was, also, a thorough musician. Of his early training he had retained nothing but an ebony silver-mounted flute, on which he played delightfully, and the distinction of possessing the most complicated ledger in existence ; so complicated, indeed, that not only no one, however skilled, could arrive at any knowledge of the totals, but he himself had long been hopelessly puzzled by them.

Years of his life had been passed poring over that book, in which the minutest sums he paid out were punctually entered. Sitting at a long table (on these occasions he insisted on having all the additional leaves added to the one in the dining-room, taking his place at the head as though assisting at a feast), his double eyeglass on his nose—for Mr Winter was near-sighted—his large red silk handkerchief in his hand, a glass of water by his side, and innumerable piles of bills all neatly tied with red tape, and docketed with name and date, spread out before him. Undoubtedly Mr Winter laboured under some

hallucination respecting this spreading out of his bills, for that alone could explain the boyish delight he exhibited on these occasions,—pacing up and down the room with an elastic step, his rubicund countenance beaming ; then rushing off to Aunt Amelia, wherever she might be, enfolding her in his arms, and covering her with kisses. Finally, as if the bounds of the old ‘Anne’ house were too narrow, he would seize upon his hat, and, with a bang of the door, precipitate himself down the stone steps into the lane, with the triumphant air of a man freed from every encumbrance !

But as Mr Winter rarely paid a single bill, and always omitted to add up the totals, awkward accidents had at various times happened, breaking up the otherwise perfect harmony of his domestic life.

On the last of these melancholy occasions, he returned home from the City unusually early, to Aunt Amelia’s dismay (she always *was* dismayed at anything unusual ; a violent fit of trembling would seize her, and she would become almost paralysed), accompanied by a shabby person in black, who kept close to him.

As he mounted the flight of stone steps, Mr Winter was in tears ;—his voluminous red handkerchief pressed to his eyes. In the hall he met Aunt Amelia, and, with a loud sob, flung himself on his knees and tried to kiss her feet (this was a delicate stroke of flattery, for Aunt Amelia had extremely small and very pretty feet, and when she was young, had been extremely proud of them), then straining her to him with such violence as to cause the poor lady to scream.

‘Ach, my life, my life!’ he cried, in his broken English. ‘My Amalie! Thy Louis has been betrayed by der Judas kiss of ees friend, ees own familiar friend! Der Judas has spoiled ee of alls — zy Louis who is zo goot, zo zaving, zo prudent! Thy Louis, who loofes die Amalie’—(here he clasped her hands and covered them with kisses)—‘vid ze passion of ees youth. Ach, Himmel! he is undone! Zee will starve—starve, my Amalie! zee will perish in ze streets! Thy Louis will die at zy side!’

Alas! had poor Aunt Amelia’s eyes been raised from her husband’s distorted countenance, down which torrents of tears now flowed, she would have seen the tongue of

the shabby nondescript in black thrust into his cheek, and his forefinger furtively resting upon the side of his nose. But better so—Aunt Amelia did not look up, and, therefore, she saw nothing.

Starting to his feet, Mr Winter, still clasping his trembling wife in his arms, was making for the open door, when the unwelcome form of the stranger, his lacklustre eyes fixed upon him, rose up to arrest him.

‘Permit me, my Amalie,’ said Mr Winter, becoming by a miracle suddenly calm, and even smiling,—‘Permit me to present to zee—an honest Herr, a gentleman on business’ (this said in his blindest manner). ‘Do not fear ze honest gentlemans, my wive!’ he added, seeing Aunt Amelia’s look of consternation,—‘Ze will use us well—a good Herr—I know im.’ (This was true; the nondescript in black had once waited on Mr Louis Winter in prison, and been kind to him.) ‘I know im’—moving his head up and down as he waved his red handkerchief, a persuasive smile on his face—‘Ze will use us well, nicht wahr, Herr Shosephs?’

Mr Joseph answered this appeal by a nod, and a pull with his gloved hand at a

lock of his front hair, hanging long and lank on his forehead.

‘Mr Shosephs, ze are welcome to my house,’ and Mr Winter gave a glance round as a master. ‘Go wid im, my loofe,’ addressing Aunt Amelia. ‘Go wid Mr Shosephs—show him de fine enamels, and de pottery, de pictures, and de Venetian lace. Ach Himmel! zem ees fine—and pays! Give him zome vine while he takes a list. Ach, zo! Dat ees goot,’—he added, seeing that the trembling Aunt Amelia prepared to obey.

‘Sorry, sir; but cannot possibly leave you, Mr Winter!’ says Mr Josephs, the sheriff’s officer, gruffly, shaking his bullet-head. ‘Orders positive—not the first time, Mr Winter—not the first time, sir! Stale is not trusted, Mr Winter!’

And Mr Josephs’ stolid countenance broke out into a broad grin, which to Aunt Amelia, standing by, quite quiet, but rigid with terror, seemed the climax of horror.

‘Guter God!’ exclaimed Mr Winter, in agonised accents, as he sank into a chair, again breaking into sobs under his silk handkerchief, now thrown over his head,—‘Guter God! Mr Shosephs! Not

trust me! I treat you as der broder, and ze doubt me!’

By this time Aunt Amelia having with uncertain hands placed decanters and glasses on the table, Mr Josephs’ resolution evidently wavered. The day was cold—the drive from London long! His eyes twinkled. He glanced from Mr Winter—still sobbing on the chair—to Aunt Amelia, trembling in silence beside the decanters.

‘Poor old gemman!’ he muttered, looking at Mr Winter, ‘never knew any harm of him. Some is born bankrupts. He’s a foreign cove. He don’t know what’s what! Give me some first-rate weeds when he was in quod last time. Poor old gemman! He’s no legs to run; he’s so fat and pursy, and he hain’t no sense to hide, if he could run. He’s a downright hidiot!’ And Mr Josephs nodded and grinned again at his own thoughts.

‘I’m mortal dry—I should like to try the sherry.’ Taking his ink-bottle, which he fastened to a buttonhole of his coat, in his hand, and his pen from his pocket, Mr Josephs still stood undecided.

A deep sigh from Aunt Amelia alone broke the monotony of Mr Winter’s noisy sobs.

‘Quiet old party?’ asked Mr Josephs, pointing with his thumb to Mr Winter.

A dismal groan at this moment broke from beneath the handkerchief, and the head under it oscillated to and fro, beating itself violently against the wall.

‘While you are talking he will dash out his brains!’ cried Aunt Amelia, running to her husband, and folding her arms round him. ‘O heavens! what shall I do? Go—go away, horrible man!’ addressing Mr Josephs. ‘If you stand staring there my husband will kill himself!’

At this moment the red handkerchief worked to such an extent, and the head under it beat itself so wildly that Aunt Amelia screamed.

‘Spare him!—oh, spare him!’ she shrieked, straining her arms round Mr Winter. ‘I will take care of him. I swear to you he shall not leave the house. Go—go away!’

‘I think I can trust um,’ muttered Mr Josephs, half aloud. ‘I’ll have a glass or two of sherry, then begin my inventory. Better leave the old cuss to his missus till my pal comes to watch um,’ and Mr Josephs glided into the dining-room towards the decanter.

At this point of the narrative, Aunt Amelia, in relating these events to her friend, Mrs Maitland, was never very distinct as to what followed. The fact was, that Mr Winter, notwithstanding Aunt Amelia's pledge, *did* contrive to get away from her into the garden, and, unperceived by Mr Josephs—who found the sherry to his taste—made his way by the espalier walk out by the back door, which opened on the Twickenham meadows, and from thence to the Continent, with a considerable sum secreted about his person; also some 'bits' of choice antique jewels and rare enamels.

This flight obliged his creditors to come to a more favourable settlement than they otherwise would have done. They showed themselves merciful. A man who could detect a copy or an imitation yards off, and who could, to a dead certainty, hit on the name of the painter of an unknown work, was worthy of consideration from the dealers. As long as he lived Mr Winter would possess that fine touch as to the paste of porcelain. A spurious or a modern article could never hope to pass the ordeal of his delicate fingers. No one, either, had such an eye for pictures of the Dutch

and Flemish school,—all claims not to be overlooked by the trade.

Besides, if Louis Winter was the most unreliable, he was also the most good-natured of mortals—and good nature may exercise a certain influence even with creditors. He was also fortunate in being the uncle of a certain John Bauer, a monied man in the City, whose very name meant backing and security. Bauer had long since ceased to afford his erratic uncle any material support as to money; but, like everyone else, he took a kindly interest in his welfare. No one knew, however, when John Bauer might relax his purse-strings.

Music was the bond between them. Both were performers, both were amateurs; and John, a shy, reserved man, singularly sensitive for a merchant, never played with such comfort to himself as when his violoncello was followed by Aunt Amelia on the piano and Uncle Louis's silver-mounted flute.

For the Winters to possess a house in which to receive him was therefore a selfish luxury to their nephew, barring all family feelings, in which he was far from deficient. So he bestirred himself

for his uncle on this occasion, and on the latter's return from the Continent, insisted upon taking possession of the famous ledger, and even went so far as to become a kind of trustee for such odds and ends of settled property as remained. No '*leetle*' affair could be transacted by Mr Winter without John Bauer's signature. This, naturally, was not forthcoming. The ledger was captured and locked up in a safe at his office in the City, and a little pastime invented for Uncle Louis, who was allowed once a month to visit John and inspect the beloved volume, under his nephew's eye.

So, thanks to his nephew and his well-filled purse, Mr and Mrs Winter had weathered this last storm, and were at the present time back again in their old home at Scatlands.





CHAPTER III.

AND when do you expect the beautiful heiress from India?' asked Mrs Maitland of Aunt Amelia, who was sitting with her neighbour at Rosebank, arrayed in a neat winter costume of black, in a bay-windowed room, known as the 'Pink Closet.'

It was a clear, frosty afternoon early in November, the sun as usual blazing down upon the favoured villa, and every pane of glass glistening as if on fire, the lawn bathed in luminous floods of yellow light, the last effort of an autumnal sun, now sinking behind a group of leafless elms at the end of the grounds.

What with the sun and a large wood fire, and Mrs Maitland's relentless questionings, Aunt Amelia felt quite faint.

And no wonder! She had been questioned remorselessly ever since she entered the room. Mrs Maitland might, indeed, have been called *a fat note of interrogation!* Her whole mind formed itself into the capacity of asking questions,—acquiring what she called useful ‘knowledge.’ If she scented a mystery—if she suspected a secret, she would attack that secret or that mystery tooth and nail, as a terrier does a hole where he scents a rat.

‘And when did you say you expect your beautiful niece from India?’ she asked again, in a loud voice.

Receiving no answer, Mrs Maitland raised her prominent eyes from the fire and fixed them with a determined stare upon her visitor.

‘Thank you, I am too warm already,’ said Aunt Amelia meekly, drawing back her chair, in response to a gesture from her friend inviting her to sit nearer.

Still she made no reply.

‘My dear friend,’ recommenced the persistent Mrs Maitland, replacing the poker with which she had been chastising the wood piled up on the grate, as a vent for her impatience, ‘allow me to make a remark. What a very extraordinary person you are!’

Aunt Amelia looked up with a sad face, flushed suddenly, then gave a deep sigh.

‘Your conduct is really inexplicable! You have been talking to me of your niece, Miss Escott, ever since your return to Scatlands, describing to me her beauty, her riches, her high position. You told me last week, and you have repeated just now, that you shortly expected her from Calcutta, as her father had, at last, resolved on sending her to England alone, instead of waiting until he could accompany her,—that she was to bring her ayah, and a whole troop of attendants with her,—and that Mr Escott would follow her in a short time. And now,’ added Mrs Maitland, with a deeply-aggrieved air (she did at that moment feel herself to be thoroughly and deeply aggrieved), ‘you will not answer a single question about her! I do not wish to force my interest upon you’—here she spoke in quite another tone, bridling and raising her exuberant bosom,—‘I make it a rule never to force my interest on anyone; but, considering the terms on which we have lived, I cannot—no, I cannot—understand the motive of your silence.’

At last Mrs Maitland ceased. As she

had spoken long and loudly, she proceeded to refresh herself by pouring some eau-de-Cologne on an embroidered handkerchief, and inhaling it with deep respirations.

It will be perceived that this lady had no disguise about her. What she thought, she said. What she wanted to know, she asked. What she desired to do, she did. Her frankness was excessive. Had her father been transported for forgery, she would have been willing and happy to enter into every detail on the subject with her friends. But, in return, she would as freely demand information of any skeleton in the closet they might possess—the more repulsive the skeleton, and the more they desired to hide it, the more certain her question. Her husband, her son Edward, Miss Sterne, her companion, answered, or appeared to her to answer, all her inquiries. *Ergo*, everyone else must—a species of logic which, to herself, was incontrovertible.

A very audible sigh escaped Mrs Winter ; she moved uneasily in her chair ; and her hand slipped into the side pocket of her dark merino dress, from which she drew out a letter bearing the Calcutta post-mark.

‘It is so dreadful to have to tell bad news!’ she murmured, with a deep-drawn sigh. ‘Dear Mrs Maitland, do not be offended if I have been a little silent. I know you mean kindly’ (this in a meek parenthesis. If the truth were told, Aunt Amelia, in her heart of hearts, much doubted her friend’s kindness at that moment). ‘I have so many anxieties,—here the tears rose to her eyes, and for a few minutes she quite broke down. Unable to command her voice, she stretched out her thin hand to touch that of her friend.

‘I always tremble,’ she continued appealingly, ‘when letters come. I wish there was no post; I never know what ill news it may bring. Several times I have tried to tell you, but could not. I am so nervous.’

‘What is in that letter?’ asked Mrs Maitland, her large, prominent eyes fixed on Mrs Winter, with the air of an inquisitor.

‘Ah!’ sighed Mrs Winter, almost with a groan, unfolding the paper and laying it out upon her lap.

‘I presume that letter relates to your niece, Miss Escott. Is she ill? Is your brother, Mr Escott, ill? Pray, answer me.’

‘Mr Escott is dead—ruined,’ gasped Aunt Amelia. ‘My brother has shot himself.’

‘Gracious heavens!’ ejaculated Mrs Maitland, sinking back in her chair. ‘And you absolutely concealed this from me?’

Here was a fact, a solid, reliable fact! Spite of a certain good-natured pity, Mrs Maitland could not suppress a general feeling of satisfaction at having obtained possession of a fact.

‘Did Mr Escott shoot himself because he was ruined?’ asked she.

Mrs Winter bowed her head in silence.

‘How very shocking! Do speak! Tell me how it happened—every particular. How could a man, holding such a high position, be ruined?’

Forced to reply, Mrs Winter roused herself,—

‘My brother had recently transferred all his principal into a private bank at Calcutta. He was to receive a high interest. His daughter Sophia was coming to England, as you know. He was to follow her. This induced him to desire to increase his income to the utmost. The bank failed. Charles was never seen alive afterwards. My niece had no one with

her but her ayah. The ayah took charge of her.'

'But was Mr Escott's life not insured?' asked the remorseless questioner. 'I thought people in India always insured their lives.'

'My poor brother had intended to do so; but when he died no trace of any document could be found.'

Mrs Winter's voice has now fallen into a whisper.

'I do not wonder, my dear Mrs Winter, that you are overcome,' said Mrs Maitland, seeing Aunt Amelia's tears dropping slowly on the letter on her lap. 'Poor girl! what a pity! Then Miss Escott is not an heiress.'

'Sophia has not a farthing,' replied Mrs Winter, looking up, with tearful eyes. (Tears were habitual to Aunt Amelia, and welled up into her eyes very readily.) 'Poor, broken-hearted father! All his desire was that she should be rich and marry well in England. The blow was more than he could bear.'

'And where is she now?' inquired Mrs Maitland, suddenly grown cold. All her eagerness about Sophia had vanished.

'She wrote from Calcutta,' answered

Aunt Amelia, fingering the letter nervously. 'She was there with her ayah, who has never left her since her birth, in some room they had hired. Her mother, who was a Brahmin, you know, the daughter of an Indian rajah, entrusted her to the care of this woman, who had fled with her when she lost caste by marrying Mr Escott. She is called Zebula, and has remained with her ever since. Sophia lived on the charity of friends until she heard from me and from my sister, Lady Danvers. To think of Sophia without a penny to call her own, brought up, as she has been, like a princess! Ah! no one knows what ruin is but those who have felt it! To look round, and know you have nothing—*nothing*!—that you have no right to the chair you sit on, the carpet you tread, and that you cannot pay for the food you eat;—that you lie down in a bed which may be dragged from under you;—that people hate you and curse you, because you have nothing.'

She covered her face with her hands, as if to shut out the dismal image.

'Sophia writes to me,' she continued, more calmly, 'thinking that I can help

her! Poor dear, *I* help her! She does not, of course, know my Louis's circumstances. No one has told her. We can just live at Scatlands. Our house, such as it is, is hers. I have told her so. I fear she will be very unhappy. It is such a change. My poor brother indulged her in everything. She has always been her own mistress. Her mother died when she was born. I am afraid,' faltered out gentle Aunt Amelia, 'Sophia has been a little spoilt.'

'Spoilt! Of course she has!' put in Mrs Maitland harshly. 'You must prepare yourself for that. Have you written to Lady Danvers?'

'Yes, I have written. My sister is rich, but—but perhaps a little close. It so often happens in large families. The wealthy members are often a little close. Catherine got so after she married Sir Reginald.'

'Rich people know the value of money,' observed Mrs Maitland sententiously. 'They respect money for itself, and take care of it for themselves. Poor people have nothing to lose, so they squander freely what they get, as long as it lasts.'

‘Too true, too true!’ responded Mrs Winter humbly. ‘I trust, however, that my sister will be touched by this catastrophe, and poor Charles’ shocking death. But I fear she will never have Sophia to live with her. She does not like young people. Then there is Jane. Everything is given up for her only daughter Jane. And Jane might not like a cousin! Lady Danvers complains that her relations are always plaguing her. I have never asked her for anything, although my dear Louis has been unlucky certainly!’

Aunt Amelia never got beyond the word ‘unlucky’ in speaking of her husband. Although truth itself in all else, she unwittingly indulged in the favourite fiction of Mr Winter being the victim of *someone* from whom (as from fate) he could not escape.





CHAPTER IV.

‘**A**ND so Miss Escott is not an heiress!’ repeated Mrs Maitland moodily, as if speaking to herself. ‘Dear me, how strange!’ Then rising, and, as she rose, spreading out the folds of a heavy black silk dress, gored tightly to her exuberant figure, and covered at the bottom with several rows of minute flounces, she added,—‘Extraordinary! I wonder what Edward will say when he comes home. I am expecting him from Oxford. You know he was always so interested about her. He used to call her “the Eastern Mystery.”’

Aunt Amelia made a movement of acquiescence.

‘He always *says* he hates girls with money. Not that *I* agree with him,’

added Mrs Maitland hastily, feeling she had gone too far in this admission. 'Nor does Mr Maitland; we both agree that marriageable girls ought to have money. I intend Edward to marry money.'

Aunt Amelia's quick perception instantly revealed to her the train of thought evolving itself in her friend's brain. She felt hurt. Mrs Maitland did often hurt her. She had no delicacy. She rose to go.

'My niece Sophia,' she said, moving towards the door, 'cannot now be an object of attention to any young gentleman of your son's pretensions. All that is past and gone. It will be very painful to teach her how changed her life is! Oh, how much I hope she will love me, and make my task easy! That she is not rich is not of the least consequence to me. I can only think of my poor brother Charles' sudden death! And what he must have suffered before he could have taken his own life, and left his child a penniless orphan! Depend on it, Mrs Maitland, Sophia will have no pretensions now beyond her sphere: you need not fear it.'

'Oh, my dear Mrs Winter!' cried Mrs Maitland, coming forward and taking her

hand, 'I did not mean to offend you. I am not at all afraid, if you mean in that sense. Edward always obeys me. I have only to tell him my wishes. All I wondered was—well, we'll say no more about it,' seeing the tears again starting into Mrs Winter's eyes. I really am very sorry for you—so sorry, too, for Mr Winter. Such a difference from having a *millionaire* niece living with him! Such a difference to me too,' she added, absently.

Aunt Amelia, midway towards the door, looked up, and stared.

'I mean in the way I shall receive her. I was going to give a ball at Christmas—I am not sure now—I don't know exactly—' Mrs Maitland stopped and hesitated. Even *she* felt her frankness was leading her too far.

'That dreadful letter!' she added, glad to change the subject, seeing Mrs Winter folding up Sophia's letter before consigning it to her pocket. 'I thought you would have read it to me. I should have liked to hear how Miss Escott expresses herself—what details she gives.'

But there was such a wounded expres-

sion on Mrs Winter's face, that even she had not the courage to urge her to read what must give her so much pain. This was a great relief to Aunt Amelia. If she could only get away before Mrs Maitland discovered how long she had carried that letter concealed in her pocket, and that she was actually, at this moment, from day to day expecting her niece's arrival! Indeed it was only the dread of Sophia's appearance before Mrs Maitland had been made acquainted with the catastrophe of her father's death, that had brought her that afternoon to Rosebank.

'Well goodbye—goodbye, my dear,' said Mrs Maitland, opening the door of the room. 'Come in the moment you have more news. Be sure you let me hear the day you expect Miss Escott. By-the-bye,' added she, following Aunt Amelia into the hall, 'are not Lady Danvers and her daughter coming to you for Christmas?'

'Yes,' answered Mrs Winter, quite overwhelmed by all that had passed—'yes, they come on Christmas Eve.'

'Ah! Yes—yes—I see. Will Miss Escott be arrived by that time?'

'That is uncertain, of course,' answered Aunt Amelia, struggling to get away from

the torrent of Mrs Maitland's questions—
'but I hope so.'

'Ah, I hope so too,' echoed the other, drawing herself up with an air of conscious patronage. 'That would be so nice—so useful to poor Miss Escott. By the way, how long is it, dear Mrs Winter, since you had that letter?'

'Some time,' replied Aunt Amelia, smitten with sudden terror of discovery.

'Some time! Dear, dear! Do you really mean you have had it and never told me? Oh, Mrs Winter, how unfriendly! Why, of course it must be some time, if Miss Escott can be home by Christmas!'

This conclusion completely disconcerted Mrs Maitland, and overwhelmed poor Aunt Amelia.

At that moment a figure appeared in the hall, that might have been called shadowy, so delicate, and small, and fragile was it, dressed in such pale colours, and with such a plaintive face, concealed by long ringlets of fair hair.

'Here, Miss Sterne, Miss Sterne, come here!' called Mrs Maitland. 'Can you fancy? Mrs Winter has had a letter in her pocket—heaven knows how long—about her brother having shot himself and

her niece being ruined, and she has never told me a word! Only fancy!’

‘Only fancy!’ echoed the shadowy figure, in a low voice, floating towards her.

This appeal to Miss Sterne was too much for Aunt Amelia. She slipped out of the front door, while Mrs Maitland’s eyes had left her for a moment to apostrophise her delinquencies to her companion.

Hurrying down the tree-bordered drive that led to the lodge, she reached her own door, thankful to have escaped. She was perfectly aware that Mrs Maitland had changed towards her. This grieved her, for they were old friends. Mrs Maitland had often been very good to her in her own distress. She did not doubt her continued kindness to herself, but it was plain Mrs Maitland now dreaded Sophia’s arrival as much as she had once desired it.

Aunt Amelia was not a woman of the world, but even her unsophisticated mind understood this. She also understood the cause. Sophia was not an heiress!

‘Another old friend gone!’ she told herself sadly, as she mounted the steps to her own door. ‘I have spent very happy days

at Rosebank! How selfish I am!’ was her next thought. ‘Sophia will repay me—Sophia will be a daughter to me!’

At this her face brightened, and she entered the panelled hall smiling.





CHAPTER V.

TWELVE o'clock on a foggy morning at the end of November—the Portsmouth coach drawn up at the entrance of the blind lane leading down to Scatlands, covered with mud and heavily laden inside and out.

The guard—his purple face muffled in a worsted comforter up to his eyes, for the weather is raw and cold—gets down and opens the door with a bang.

‘Now, miss, this is the place where you must get out for Scatlands. Quick, please miss—no time to spare. Horses change at the “Red Lion,” close by,’ and he points with his thumb towards a few straggling houses—the outskirts of Twickenham.

The guard speaks in a gruff, hoarse voice

—a voice that sounds a long way off, as coming through a tube, as he puts his head into the coach and addresses himself to a confused mass of inside passengers, crowded upon each other, three on a side.

The fog is so thick, and the accumulation of human breath so dense (both windows having been drawn up to keep out the cold), that nothing individual is visible.

At the sound of his voice the human mass heaves, separates a little, then heaves again as a tall figure rises.

‘Oh dear, miss. For gracious’ sake mind where you step. You’ve a-trod on my tóe,’ calls out a woman, in a voice like a rasp, from the further corner. ‘Oh, how you’ve hurt me!’

‘Come, miss, come!’ calls out the guard. ‘Get out, or we shall carry you on to London. Make you pay the fare too!’

The idea of being carried on to London evidently alarms the tall, slim girl, in deep mourning, with a thick crape veil falling over her face. She struggles up and pushes her way somewhat hastily towards the door.

‘Take care,’ cries a woman from the other side; ‘you’ll kill my baby,’ and at the

same moment, leaning forward, she catches her by the shoulder to put her back.

But Sophia, already out of the coach, balancing herself with some difficulty on the narrow step, and holding on by the door handle, manages to turn round and cast on her such a pair of indignant eyes that they flash through her thick veil.

‘Touch me if you dare,’ she cries, in a deep-toned voice, still holding by the door handle.

A passenger, sitting on the opposite side of the coach, seizes the outraged mother’s arm.

‘Come now. None of this in my company. Keep your hands to yourself, ma’am. You are much worse than the lady! Who cares for you or your baby? D—n the baby! It’s kept me awake all the way from Portsmouth.’

Sophia has now reached the ground, and is carefully gathering up her black skirts from the mud, which lies thick upon the road.

The guard draws from the boot a solid wooden box, clamped with steel. On the outside in large letters is the address,—

‘ Miss SOPHIA ESCOTT,
Passenger,
Calcutta to Portsmouth.’

Near this there is a small card, fastened to the cord, on which is written,—

‘ Miss ESCOTT,
Scatlands,
Twickenham.’

The guard throws the box contemptuously on the ground. Being heavy, it heaves over, then settles down into the mud.

Sophia turns with an angry look.

‘ If you are so careless,’ she exclaims, ‘ you will break my box ! Do not throw it in the mud like that ! Lift it up, I beg of you, immediately.’

How darkly her eyes flash through her veil as she speaks.

‘ Whew !’ answers the guard, with a long whistle out of the depths of his white comforter. ‘ Your orders indeed ! And

pray who may *you* be? Do you think we're a-going to stop the coach all day a-waiting upon *you*?'

'What the devil are you about, Bill?' inquires the gruff voice of the coachman from the box. He is so enveloped in a big white driving coat, with rows of graduated capes down to his knees, that to turn round is impossible. 'Surely you are not unloading at the top of the lane!'

'All right, Ben. Hold your jaw!' shouts the guard, in his far-away voice.

'Leave Bill alone, coachee!' observes a sallow-faced youth on the box seat, with a blue bandage round his throat, and a large pipe in his mouth. 'Don't you see he is sweet on the young miss?'

'Ha, ha, ha!' rises in a chorus from the outside passengers at this observation. 'Ha, ha, ha!' is echoed from the inside.

The woman with the baby has heard, and her laugh is the loudest and most discordant.

'I'm glad she's a-getting it!' she cries, nodding her head to her opposite neighbour. 'Such a stuck-up minx! Never spoke all along the road!'

'Nobody can't say that of you, marm, anyway,' is the response from the aggra-

vated passenger. 'Nor of your baby neither! She's a confounded handsome young ooman, and quite the lady, that's what *she* is.'

Sophia has heard every word. She is scarlet. Her hands clench themselves under her black cloak. She raises her long throat, throws back her head, and casts a look of defiance upon all around. Spite of her gathered-up skirts, her shabby dress, and the mud in which she is standing, she is regal.

'Ha-ha! he-he!' rises again from the outsiders, and is again echoed from within.

The coachman, who cannot turn, and therefore sees nothing, joins in for company, and gives his opinion that 'she is a stunner.'

'Now, make haste, miss. What are you a-going to do for me?' asks the guard, advancing towards her, with his head on one side. To avoid mistakes, he slaps his hand on his side-pocket. 'There's no time to lose. Can't be less nor half-a-crown, seeing the size of your box, and you with such quality airs!'

Sophia, with a trembling hand, draws out a delicate little Indian purse of gold filigree, ornamented with red tassels.

(That purse was the last gift of her ayah Zebula, when she left her on the deck of the vessel.)

‘O heavens!’ she murmurs, opening it, ‘what am I to do? I have only gold.’

‘Then give it me,’ says the guard insolently, stretching out his hand towards the purse, which Sophia clutches convulsively.

The coachman, getting impatient, cracks his whip and touches the ear of the off leader, causing that animal to kick out, dangerously near Sophia, who screams.

‘I’m a-going on, Bill,’ he growls, raising his arms to tighten the reins—‘blowed if I ain’t. You must settle with the young lady without the coach. Now or never is the word.’

‘I’m a-coming, Ben—all right! I’ll take your box back into the boot, I will, if you don’t tip me,’ to Sophia.

The guard’s two hands grasp the box.

‘I have told you I have nothing but gold,’ cries Sophia. ‘I can’t give you that; I am too poor.’

‘Poor be d—d!’ he mutters, and lifts the box from the ground.

‘Put it down, put it down!’ screams Sophia, rushing forward.

She seizes the cord, and gazes up despairingly at the loaded coach. Will no one help her?

At this moment the coachman slashes his long whip; the four horses spring forward. Bill, the guard, loosens his hold of the box, which falls into the road, then springs lightly on to a little step at the back of the coach, laying fast hold of a brass handle.

As the heavily-laden vehicle dashes onwards, it sways to one side, lurching towards Sophia, throwing the guard almost on her; at which Bill doubles his disengaged hand and shakes it in her face.

‘Good-bye, miss, and ill-luck to you,’ he shouts, at the top of his voice. ‘As you have served me, so may others serve *you*.’

Before the words are out of his mouth, the coach, and Bill hanging on behind, have disappeared into the fog round a corner, and the rattle of the wheels is all the evidence that it has been there at all.





CHAPTER VI.



GOD! can the world be so hard?' was Sophia's thought.

Tears gathered in her eyes. Among all those men not one to help her. Can this be England?

Then all she had suffered in India whirled through her brain. Never, no never before had she been alone, grappling with strangers. Never until now had a harsh word been spoken to her! Even on her passage from India everyone on board made much of her.

And now to be threatened and insulted by such wretches! What was she to do? She knew not!

In great misfortunes there is dignity—the dignity of woe. The climax of the great life-drama hurrying wildly on to destruction, and, like the throb of fever

to the wasting body, supporting, sustaining, exciting, while it destroys.

But in the sting of small mishaps there is disgrace, contumely. No one can claim pity for a mean insult, nor protection for some degrading trifle which, all the while, eats into the soul.

Not in those dreadful hours when her father lay a corpse in the house, and she had been driven out of her home by his unpaid creditors, had Sophia felt so abject as she did now.

Zebula had been with her! Zebula! In the climax of her loneliness, she spoke the name aloud, and at the sound her heart gave a great bound. Alas! could Zebula see her!

She turned very pale, her lips were bloodless, and a dimness came into her eyes shaded by the dark eyebrows.

She had travelled all night, and had eaten nothing. Now, all at once, her heart seemed to stand still. She felt so cold and sick she thought she was going to die.

Die! Why not? If life were to be like this why should she wish to live?

For a few minutes she stood rigid as a statue, waiting to see what would

happen. Then suddenly the young blood which had stagnated rushed through her veins, a flush rose on her cheeks. With the warmth of life came hope.

She raised her veil and looked round. Her eye fell upon her box, tilted over on one side near the ditch, in which a stream of muddy water ran over a bed of coarse green weeds.

In that box was all she possessed. Could she carry it herself? She laid hold of the cord and tried to raise it. Alas! she could not so much as move it.

Her hands fell to her side—she must wait. Surely someone would pass, someone from whom she could at least learn the way to Scotlands.'

Again she gazed round anxiously. Not a single house was in sight. Sounds came to her from time to time, dulled by the mist, the sound of labourers working in the fields. Once a dog barked, and children's voices came faintly through the heavy air;—there was the click of a smithy far away, and many dim noises of active life.

A lane opened from the highroad, exactly opposite to where she was standing; but it was so shrouded by fog, and dark-

ened by the trees which hung over the discoloured walls, that but a few yards were visible.

Overhead there was no sky: the fog canopied the earth like a pall.

Nothing to be seen but quickset hedges growing on the high banks that bordered flat fields beside the road; every branch and twig, every leaf and stalk, dripping with moisture.

Oaks and elms, lopped into ugliness, broke the dim outlines; a few brown and yellow leaves still clustering on the branches.

Beside her a wooden gate opened into a ploughed field, bare with upturned furrows. These furrows looked to her like graves!

And this desolation was England? England, the land of her dreams—of her father's longings! Oh! for the burning skies, the blood-red sunsets, the spicy breezes, dangerous in the strong breath of their perfumes, the sultry air warming the blood like a furnace, of her native land!

England! Sophia abhorred the very name. Nothing could be good in such a wintry desert. A hateful country, and the people barbarous.

She was trembling from head to foot.

The hateful damp clung to her. It fell upon her like rain. She drew her long black cloak closer round her, and gazed around.

Why—oh why was she here? What had she done to be so punished?

As she moved, her hand pressed convulsively upon a little phial which lay concealed in her bosom. Yes, Zebula's charm was there. This assurance calmed her. The look of suffering faded out of her eyes. Again she pressed her hand upon the hidden treasure.

'I am safe!' she muttered. 'I can defy them! Dear Zebula! We may meet sooner than you think!'

At this moment the sound of a horse's hoofs became audible coming from the Twickenham side.

A rider, enveloped in a dark cloak, galloped round the corner. Sophia ran forward. At the risk of her life she placed herself before him.

'Stop! stop! For God's sake stop! Only a moment—half a moment.'

She stretched out her arms imploringly.

The rider's horse, startled at the unusual figure, swerved and nearly threw

him. The man shook his whip savagely and dashed past, the mud from his horse's hoofs flying into her face, and splashing her black dress.

'Good God! Must I stand here for ever! Will no one help me!' she cried, in the bitterness of her soul.

Her own voice seemed strange to her. Tears of anger poured down her cheeks. She tried to wipe away the mud from her face and clothes. To be seen by her aunt—by anyone—in such a guise! Not even to be clean! She sobbed aloud.

A quarter of an hour passed (it seemed to Sophia that she had stood there many hours). Then there came a rattle of wheels far off, on the London side.

She dried her eyes hastily and listened. As the wheels approached, her spirit rose. Should she ask again for help, and be again refused? She felt no better than a beggar.

Looming out of the fog appeared a yellow gig on high wheels, coming from London. It was close upon her before she could distinguish what it was.

Two men were seated inside. At the opening of the lane the gig drew up, and one of the occupants jumped down on the

further side from where she was standing, a valise in his hand.

‘Will you not let me, sir, drive you down to Rosebank?’ inquired his companion, who held the reins, touching his hat as he spoke.

‘No, thank you, Walters, I would rather walk. The coach will bring my luggage by-and-by to the “Red Lion.” Good day. Take care of that horse of yours; he is a good one.’

‘I believe you, Mr Maitland,’ answered Mr Walters, taking off his hat and shaking the wet drops from the brim.

Meanwhile Sophia was waiting for the gig to move. Then she would make an appeal to the person called Mr Maitland. She had been looking at him all the time. She could see him plainly, for he was not wrapped up like his companion. Her eye ran rapidly over him.

A tall, powerful young man, with thick, curly, auburn hair, and a sunburnt face, grave in repose, but lit up by clear, full eyes, with bright lights in them.

From that grave expression, and a certain tone of command in his voice, Sophia felt drawn towards him. She hastily decided two things,—that he was the hand-

somest European she had yet seen, and that he was a gentleman.

When the gig moved on, Mr Maitland, for the first time, perceived her. In the act of stepping forward into the lane, he drew back with a start. She was standing by her box, near the ditch, her veil raised, her face flushed.

His eyes travelled all over her, then to her box. He was evidently puzzled. All this was the work of a moment.

Now that there was someone before her to whom she could speak, a gentleman who could tell her all she wanted, Sophia was struck dumb.

Something in the look of those inquiring eyes daunted her. Did he, too, suspect her? Would *he* call her bad names?

Again the blood rushed back to her heart, and her gaze fell before him.

After a pause—

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Mr Maitland, crossing the road to where she was standing, ‘are you waiting for anyone?’





CHAPTER VII.

‘**N**O, I was left here by the coach.’
Sophia hesitated. Under that fixed, grave look her words refused to come.

‘Can I be of any service to you?’ Maitland continued, contemplating her with increasing interest. Her beauty, her evident embarrassment, were having their full effect.

‘Will you tell me the way to Scatlands?’ she asked, conscious that something must be said.

‘Scatlands? Oh, yes; you are close to it. I suppose you mean Mrs Winter’s?’

Sophia bent her head.

‘I am going to the next house myself—Rosebank. Scatlands is at the end of this lane. Will you allow me to show you the way?’

As Sophia had now regained her self-possession, and with it somewhat of the cold manner natural to her, whatever suspicions young Maitland might have entertained vanished entirely. He was greatly struck by her large melancholy eyes turned with such unconscious pathos upon him.

‘You are very good,’ she answered. ‘If I am not a trouble, I should be very glad.’

Then, fearing she had perhaps spoken too eagerly, her cheeks crimsoned with blushes.

‘No trouble at all. Quite the reverse—a pleasure,’ was the response; and as he spoke, Edward Maitland turned into the dark perspective of the lane.

‘I am quite a stranger,’ Sophia added, following him—he smiling as she did so.

Under the influence of that smile—which lit up his face with a new charm—she thawed.

‘You must think it very odd to find me standing alone in the highroad,’ she began.

Edward Maitland’s eyes expressed such decided interest in what she was about to say—an interest so very different from the suspicious curiosity with which he had at

first contemplated her, that Sophia felt encouraged to proceed.

‘I only arrived in England last night. I came here by the Portsmouth coach. The guard put me down on this road. He was very rude to me.’

‘Rude to you!’ ejaculated Edward; ‘is it possible? Do you know which coach it was? Can you give me any clue? Rude to you!’

His voice was so soft—his manner so full of sympathy, that again Sophia felt irresistibly drawn towards him. She had now taken some steps, walking beside him, down the lane.

‘I do not know anything about the coach. I can tell you nothing. But the guard put me down where you found me, and—O heavens!’ she cried, stopping suddenly and clasping her hands; ‘my box! I forgot it! It is lying on the road.’

She was rushing back, but Maitland put out his hand and stopped her.

‘Pray do not agitate yourself. I will look after it. Left in the road, did you say?’

Again he gazed curiously at her, and there was a tone in his voice that grated on her ear.

Sophia followed him back into the road.

He was already leaning over the box, reading the address.

‘Miss Escott! Good God! are you Miss Escott?’ he exclaimed, gazing at her in amazement.

‘Yes, I am Sophia Escott’ she answered, in a low voice, averting her head—she felt so ashamed.

‘I may say,’ a flush of rosy colour rising on his face, ‘that I have heard so much about you, that already I know you well. I have drawn many portraits of you, Miss Escott, and given them to Mrs Winter.’

‘Portraits of me!’ interrupted Sophia, with amazement. ‘How could that be, when you had never seen me?’

‘Oh, quite possible,’ answered Maitland. ‘They were dream-portraits. Was it not an unwarrantable liberty?’

After an awkward pause on both sides—

‘Am I like what you imagined me?’

Sophia’s voice was soft and low as she put this question.

‘Do not ask me,’ replied Edward, growing confused.

‘Oh, but I do,’ she insisted. ‘Tell me, Mr Maitland.’

‘No, Miss Escott, you are not. I am not capable of conjuring up such a vision.’

A dark flash came into his grey eyes for a moment only as he bent them on her, and the colour on his cheek deepened—burning, as it were, all over him. He felt that he had said too much. He had no right to confess how long and how constantly she had occupied his thoughts.

Sophia, on her part, would certainly have resented it had not some cord of subtle sympathy drawn her to him; as it was, her black eyes raised themselves to his.

It was evident Maitland knew nothing of what had happened.

‘You have not heard then?’ she began in a low voice, then stopped abruptly.

‘I have heard nothing but that you were expected in England by your aunt, Mrs Winter, the dearest little woman in the world. I have been absent for the last month at Oxford. Dear Miss Escott, if my nonsense has pained you do not answer me. Something has happened to shock you since I left home; I understand so much. Let me take you to your aunt. I beg you a thousand pardons.’

‘And my box, what am I to do with it? That dreadful box.’

Edward smiled. A moment before,

Sophia, overwhelmed with humiliation, had shrunk from him. Now she smiled also. 'There was a charm about him which, spite of herself, fascinated her.

'That dreadful box!' he echoed, laughing. 'I would carry it myself, only I know my mother would hear of it and be vexed; everything is known at Twickenham, for all the women walk about here from morning till night and make a story of every trifle.' Then turning to her with fresh curiosity, 'Do you mean, Miss Escott, that you arrived quite alone, and your box was thrown into the road?'

'Yes, indeed, and I was obliged to stand by it till you came.'

'Shameful! But why alone? Here,' cried Maitland suddenly, to a man who had just appeared coming from Twickenham, 'here, I want you.'

The man ran up, touching his hat.

'Take this lady's box, and walk on before us until I call to you to stop; do you hear?'

'Yes, sir.'

The man shouldered the steel-clamped box and walked on before them.

'Now, Miss Escott, let me have the pleasure of escorting you to your aunt.'

You must be quite chilled by the fog. What dreadful weather for your first experience of England.'

But somehow to Sophia the chill and the gloom of the fog had altogether vanished.

'Oh no, I do not mind cold at all. Is it far to Scotlands?'

'Quite near, at the end of this lane. I am your next-door neighbour, only think.'

A glow of warmth and colour lighted up Sophia's clear olive complexion as he spoke. Walking side by side, on one of the straggling paths bordering the wall, Edward Maitland caught glimpses from time to time of her face. Its contour was perfect, the profile faultless; her nose aquiline with rosy nostrils, her mouth well formed, a little large, with full, red lips; a moulded chin showed firmness.

Young as she was, faint lines had formed round the mouth, which closed with precision over white and even teeth. Her dark hair fell in abundant curls upon her shoulders making her natural paleness still more striking.

But the glory of her face was in her eyes, dark, lustrous, now fiercely repellent, now dazzling with intense lights.

‘A grand creature,’ was young Maitland’s mental decision, ‘and faultless in face and feature.’

Sophia caught one of his furtive glances. ‘Did he still suspect her?’ she asked herself.

Detected in the act of studying her, Edward turned away abashed; the silence between them again became awkward.

Sophia broke it resolutely.

‘Mr Maitland, I feel that some explanation is due to you. When I first saw you, I was so agitated I scarcely knew what I said; I had just been insulted.’

‘Insulted!’ echoed Maitland with passion, but Sophia signed to him to let her go on.

‘I was so glad to find some one who would listen to me, then, so taken aback at discovering that you knew me, that I forgot my duty.’

‘What duty, Miss Escott? What duty can you owe me?’

‘The duty of telling you the truth. I am Sophia Escott, it is true, but I am not what you think me.’ She spoke with grave simplicity. There was not the shadow of a doubt in her heart nor a cloud upon her face.

Edward Maitland started, then stood rooted to the spot in pained surprise. Quick as thought Sophia seized his meaning.

‘No, no, not that, thank God, not that!’ she cried, clasping her hands. ‘A great misfortune has overtaken me, but not through my fault. I am an orphan—a dependant. I have absolutely nothing in the world. I am come to England on the charity of relations; pray, do not misunderstand me, I have nothing.’

This was in reply to the expression of infinite relief, almost of joy, depicted on the countenance of her companion.

‘You see I am in mourning,’ continued Sophia, steeling herself to the effort, and not looking at him. (He would despise her, this gallant, handsome stranger, but she would not for a moment appear other than she was.)

‘I had not noticed your dress till now,’ answered Maitland, his tone showing how deeply he was moved; ‘Miss Escott, for God’s sake, treat me as a friend; I am a friend; tell me what has happened.’

‘My father is dead—he was ruined—it broke his heart.’ Spite of her assumed calmness Sophia’s voice broke with a sob. Now it was all over.

‘Gracious God! This must have been most sudden!’ exclaimed young Maitland, standing motionless under the trees. He was amazed beyond the power of utterance. Sophia mistook what was complete bewilderment for repulsion.

‘Yes,’ she continued, dropping out her words slowly and coldly. ‘Yes, very sudden; but for my ayah, Zebula, I should have died!’ She raised her proud young head to take, as she thought, one last look at him.

Never did face express more tenderness. His eyes had filled with tears. He wiped them away hastily.

‘Poor child! Poor orphan!’ he murmured, gazing at her with an infinite expression of pity. He stopped, and Sophia stopped also.

‘Believe me, Miss Escott, I shall never, never forget the confidence with which you have honoured me. From the very first moment I heard your name, you were a subject of the deepest, the most enthusiastic interest to me;’ he paused, the strange expression on her face arrested him. ‘How much more now,’ he continued, ‘when I see you desolate, bereaved, deprived of all that outward prosperity that

made your position so brilliant. But, permit me to say, the interest with which the beautiful daughter of the eastern *millionaire* inspired me, is as nothing to the sympathy your misfortunes have created.'

Her dark eyes were turned on the ground. She was drinking in every word, eagerly, like drafts of a delicious wine.

'Nothing,' added Edward, 'could increase the interest with which you are endowed. But you are now invested with a halo that makes you almost sacred.'

As he concluded, her head sank upon her breast. The surprise caused by his words was almost too much for her.

'Are you quite sure, Mr Maitland,' she said, in a low voice, 'that you will not be ashamed of my acquaintance? Think well before you answer; I should feel it more afterwards.'

'Do you reckon me as the vilest of wretches, Miss Escott,' was his indignant reply, and he took her hand and just touched the finger-tips with his lips.

Sophia drew it hurriedly away, and blushed.

'The world,' he added, 'doubtless is cruel and self-interested, but after all it

is not so bad as you imagine it. Miss Escott, I am not of the world.'

A tremor ran through her from head to foot. The sick, faint feeling which had overcome her in the road returned; her throat was dry; her breath came short and quick; but for the support of the wall she would have fallen. She gallantly hid all this, however, and raised a pair of glistening eyes to Maitland?

'Then I may venture still to look on you as a friend?'

'A friend! Yes, indeed, more than a friend!'

Edward checked himself; the frankness of his nature was leading him too far. She had strangely moved him. Before they had met she had engaged his fancy, now she appealed to every sense of his manly nature.

'Scatlands is close by,' he said, breaking the too dangerous conversation; 'there is the door' (the man carrying the box was beside it). 'I will detain you no longer, Miss Escott; I have no right to do so. How I envy Mrs Winter,' he exclaimed, in an irrepressible burst of enthusiasm, 'the pleasure which awaits her!'

'Oh yes, my aunt,' said Sophia, absently,

roused from a delicious dream. 'Yes, Scatlands and Aunt Amelia.'

Her face darkened as she spoke. Must they part? Part while he was calling himself her friend?

All her dislike to strangers, her disgust of England, the bitterness of her dependence flashed before her. Her Aunt Winter, whom she had figured to herself with Zebula (blindly jealous of everyone who approached her) as a tyrant forced upon her by necessity—the incarnation of her misfortunes. Maitland alone had stood between her and her dread of the future. Now he was going.

'Oh!' cried she, almost speaking aloud, 'it is so strange, so lonely. I shudder at it all. I shrink from everyone.'

'You are excited, Miss Escott, and no wonder; but Mrs Winter is the most gentle creature in existence—you must love her—she will reconcile you to life.'

'Never!' cried Sophia; 'I feel it. Her letters! They were conventional—full of herself and her feelings! I have been so beloved—so indulged! I want so much—No; I feel I shall never care for Mrs Winter.'

'Hush, hush!' said Edward Maitland,

soothingly. These occasional rays of light from her shut-up nature exercised a strange fascination over him. 'Do not harden yourself, dear Miss Escott, against your friends. We will all unite to make you happy. My mother shall come and see you at once; she will be full of sympathy.'

(It was a standing peculiarity of Edward's, that he invariably gave his mother credit for precisely the very quality she did not possess.)

'Ah! you do not know me, Mr Maitland. You have the cold English blood. These people will despise me. They will drive me mad. But I must not keep you; you are going to your mother. You have a home—parents. You are loved as I was once!'

She spoke with vehemence. He smiled.

'I hope I am loved,' taking her outstretched hand, which fitted so closely in his own, and pressing it warmly.

Yet the parting seemed cold. He longed to say more; but dared not.

'Good-bye, Miss Escott,' was all he added. 'When I next see you, all these fancies will have vanished. Remember, that I shall never forget the confidence you have reposed in me. You have all

my sympathy. The fates have brought us together. You have called me your friend.'

'Yes, my friend,' Sophia repeated the words,—'My first friend. I never had one before. I lived alone with my ayah, and poor papa! You will teach me what an English friend is!'

'That I will,' was Edward's prompt reply. 'I trust you will allow me to come and see you soon, then I will give you your first lesson.'

Sophia looked up at him with a bright smile. Her dark eyes met his.

'Yes, let us meet soon, Mr Maitland.'

The words were not much, but the look that accompanied them enthralled him.

Reluctantly, he raised his hat, and turned his steps slowly towards Rosebank—Sophia's eyes following him to a gate further down the lane.

Although he lived in the next house, she seemed parting from him for ever. Would he be the same when they next met? Her distrust of all the world was extending even to Maitland.

How tall and manly he looked, as the fog closed round his graceful figure! What an impression of power he conveyed—of power, protection, and mercy.

Now she must meet her aunt! Her heart sank within her. She would have liked to fly—but whither? What other house would shelter her? This was another stab! It must be borne, like the rest.

‘Is this Scatlands?’ she asked of the man who stood by with her box.

‘Yes, miss—the name is written up there,’ and he pointed to the lozenge, and the effigy of the Roman emperor—under which the painted letters gleamed out.

The bald, bare façade of the Anne house looked down upon Sophia remorselessly. The rows of alternated bricks and white mortar dazzled her. She had pictured to herself a cottage, a bungalow—a villa enshrouded in creepers—full of plants and flowers.

Was this dreary, staring house fated to be her home? No one could be happy in such a place. A passion of tears was rising to her eyes—she checked them.

‘Shall I ring the bell, miss?’ asked the man, surprised at her silence.

‘Yes, ring the bell,’ she answered doggedly. He did. The sound rang in the air, smiting upon Sophia’s heart with something like the knell of death in it.



CHAPTER VIII.

‘**W**HY did you not write—why did you not let me know?’ was all Aunt Amelia could find to say in her agitation, as she threw her arms round Sophia’s neck, and again and again pressed her to her motherly heart. ‘Oh, Sophia, I cannot speak.’

‘If I am able to bear it, Aunt Amelia, I think you can,’ was Sophia’s cold reply. Her hard tone smote Mrs Winter to the very soul—she looked up at her, and at that moment an instinct, a presentiment came over her that her niece would never understand her.

She tried to master the feeling. She did master it to a certain extent ; but the inexpressible longings of love and sympathy with which she had regarded the lonely girl were shattered.

‘Come in, my love, come in,’ she said

nervously, bustling about, 'warm yourself by the fire. What a journey! How cold your hands are!'

Sophia surrendered her hands reluctantly to her aunt's grasp. Aunt Amelia leading her into the drawing-room, opening from the pannelled hall. Then, observing her white face and languid manner—she was suddenly smitten by the thought that she had had nothing to eat.

'Of course, of course,' she said, half to herself; 'she must be faint and hungry.' Then, turning towards her, with a fresh effusion of love, 'Oh, my dear, dear child, I am so glad to see you! I am grown quite stupid; I will go at once to fetch you something; but first let me take off your bonnet and unfasten your cloak.'

Sophia, silent and dejected, submitted to all this with sad, fixed eyes.

Aunt Amelia, after another longing glance, went and returned noiselessly, with wine and refreshments, not pressing them on her, but timidly offering them, as to a stranger. At last, when there was nothing more to do, she seated herself opposite, her heart beating so violently, it seemed impossible Sophia should not hear it.

Looking thus at her, Mrs Winter's first feeling was akin to terror. What was she to do with this penniless niece, who looked like a queen?

Then, gazing at her in a silence Sophia did not care to break, as she helped herself to the refreshments her aunt had brought, Mrs Winter grew ashamed of her fears, and endeavoured to trace in her chiselled face some likeness to her poor brother, as a link between them.

'My love,' said she, sadly laying her hand upon Sophia's arm, in a plaintive endeavour to break the ice between them, 'you remind me of my poor Charles, only he never had your grand look. I am glad it is so. We cannot be strangers. Poor dear Charles!'

Mrs Winter burst into tears. It was a relief to her to cry, not only from the tender recollections evoked by Sophia's resemblance to her brother, but also from the more immediate feeling of bitter disappointment that was stealing over her at her niece's bearing.

At the mention of her father's name, Sophia's lips quivered, then compressed themselves upon her set teeth.

‘Mrs Winter—Aunt Amelia—I cannot speak of my father,—I cannot—I cannot!’ she added wildly, glancing at the door, with some undefined notion of escape; ‘it is all so fresh, it seems but yesterday. When I know you better, perhaps,—but not now, not now—I cannot bear it. Excuse me;’—this in response to the pain and astonishment depicted in Mrs Winter’s face, down which the tears were streaming. ‘Excuse me; I have been brought up alone; only with Zebula, my ayah.’

‘But, Sophia,’ pleaded Aunt Amelia, suddenly arrested in the full tide of her sorrow, ‘I am to be a mother to you. I am your nearest relative, your father’s favourite sister, chosen by him to take charge of you. Have confidence in me, I beseech you. Do not, for an instant, treat me, or think of me, as a stranger. Oh, Sophia, I have no words to tell you how my heart bleeds for you!’

The poor, little woman had risen and thrown her arms round her neck. It was not Sophia, it was her beloved brother, that Aunt Amelia clung to.

Sophia raised her stately head, sweeping the long curls over her aunt’s face. She did not absolutely repulse Mrs Win-

ter. The mention of her father's name had somewhat softened her; but no kiss answered the shower of love which Aunt Amelia was pouring out on her.

'Forgive me, aunt,' she said; 'I cannot talk like Europeans; the words choke me. I have had a great trial. Even then I was silent.'

'Ah, my poor, beautiful child!' burst out Mrs Winter, too much excited to heed Sophia; 'who knows that so well as I? Yes, yes; silent suffering; how it kills! Who will ever feel for you like me?'

'By-and-by, perhaps,' answered she half-beseechingly, putting Aunt Amelia aside, and rising.

Mrs Winter sank back into a chair.

'Not now. There are things in my life over which I must draw a veil, except,' she added dreamily—and a vision of young Maitland, as he had looked when he bid her good-bye, passed vaguely before her—'except to those I love.'

'God grant you may love me, my child!' ejaculated Aunt Amelia, clasping her thin hands together as fervently as if she had been uttering a prayer for life; 'all the happiness of your life depends on your loving me. I am a poor, broken-down

creature, too old and too stupid to be a companion to such as you, my love. But I am used to grief and misfortune. At least I can pity you. Oh, do trust me, and try, dear Sophia, to love me !'

No answering word came from the other's lips. She sat where her aunt had placed her, close to the fire, her feet on the fender, gazing moodily into the flame. The heat had raised a slight flush upon her cheek, that added a fresh charm to her beauty. Aunt Amelia contemplated her with renewed dismay. 'How beautiful she is !' was her thought. 'Alas ! alas !'

'This is but a poor home for you, my Sophia,' she continued aloud (Aunt Amelia was trying string after string, as it were, of the human instrument before her, to see where she could find an answering chord). 'I suppose you know something of our story ?'

'I do,' said Sophia, gravely, without taking her eyes from the fire. 'But I preferred coming to you, to my other aunt Lady Danvers.'

'Thank you for that,' cried Aunt Amelia, colouring with delight, and grasping her niece's hand, which lay impassive on her

black dress. 'That was noble of you—an act of sacrifice.'

'I followed the wishes of my father,' was Sophia's cold reply. 'I can really take no credit for it. I had no choice in the matter. His will was sacred.'

Again Mrs Winter was repelled. This superb niece sitting beside her, her favourite brother's child, had never opened her mouth but to wound her. She felt so humiliated she could have sunk into the floor. Still she struggled bravely.

'Scatlands is not a bad house, but except this room it is poorly furnished. Uncle Louis has very recently had misfortunes. We have very little money. But such as it is, it is your home, my child, to do as you please in. All I want is to make you happy.'

'I know it is my home,' responded Sophia, her eyes still fixed on the burning coals, in which she was tracing strange outlines of mountain ranges, such as shut in the horizon of her home in the hot season. 'I am sorry to be a further expense to you. It cannot be helped. I must get used to it, and I hope you will also.'

Was not all this confirmation of what Zebula in her jealousy had impressed on

her—‘that, once in her power, her aunt would starve and misuse her. Never, never trust the white viper,’ were Zebula’s words, ‘she will bite you, and the poison will rest in your blood.’

‘I always had a house of my own,’ she continued absently. ‘I am grieved to be a burden.’

‘Not grieved, dear Sophia, surely not,’ remonstrated Aunt Amelia, gallantly struggling to the end, ‘when you will ever be our first thought—if you will allow it,’ she added in a lower tone, catching sight of the hard-set lines of her niece’s profile. ‘Then there is Uncle Louis! Ah, Sophia, how can I have forgotten Uncle Louis?’

At her husband’s name Mrs Winter’s eyes glistened, and a gentle colour mounted to her cheeks. Even Sophia turned her head, and allowed the faintest shadow of a smile to cross her face at Mrs Winter’s eagerness.

‘Uncle Louis is an angel; the most excellent, unselfish man that ever lived. I ought not to say so of my own husband,’—and the flush in Aunt Amelia’s face deepened to a blush,—‘but it is the truth. You will delight in Uncle Louis. He will be so angry that you did not give him

notice of your coming. He fully intended to have met you at Portsmouth.'

To all this Sophia listened with more interest than she had yet evinced. Something told her she should like Uncle Louis. About Aunt Amelia she had decided—to her she was unsympathetic.

All the prejudices and bitter animosities of the ayah, during those last days at Calcutta, rose up fresh and strong—to blind her to the angelic sweetness of Mrs Winter. To her it seemed but falseness.

'My love,' continued Aunt Amelia—rapidly pursuing the one topic in which Sophia showed sympathy,—'Uncle Louis is, as you know, a German. He plays exquisitely on the flute. I hear you are a good musician. Is it so?'

Sophia bowed her head in a lofty way.

'That will be charming. You and my husband will play together. He used to make me sit up half the night to accompany him—long ago—when we were first married.'

And she heaved a sigh as she recalled those halcyon days, when credit, money and friends were abundant.

'Now, I am too old. I cannot satisfy his fastidious taste—he *is* fastidious. You

really do play well? Scientifically, Sophia? You know how difficult the Germans are?’

‘I think I shall satisfy Uncle Louis. I will try. Music is all that is left me.’

‘Ah!—not so, my child. Be thankful to God for granting you so much’ (an indignant glance from Sophia told that that was a line of argument not to be admitted). Catching nervously at her breath, Aunt Amelia continued, ‘A great musician; you have a musical face—pardon me for doubting your skill, but Louis is such a performer. Health, youth, and’ (a little pause) ‘such wonderful beauty.’

To do Sophia justice she was not vain, and she received this compliment with perfect indifference.

‘Then there is John Bauer,’ continued Aunt Amelia. He plays the violoncello. You must like John Bauer as well as Uncle Louis; he is often here.’

‘Who is John Bauer?’ asked Sophia, raising her large eyes from her castle-building in the fire, full on Aunt Amelia with such a disdainful stare as quite overwhelmed that sensitive little woman. ‘I never heard of John Bauer!’

‘John Bauer is Mr Winter’s nephew,’ answered Aunt Amelia, with nervous

quickness. Sophia's deliberate stare, and the ill-suppressed haughtiness of her manner, alarmed her. 'John Bauer is a merchant, like my Louis, only he is enormously rich. He has never been unlucky like my husband—never sacrificed himself so generously to treacherous friends. John Bauer is very amiable, not handsome, but so good, I hope he will please you.'

Then a vision of those happy evenings arose in her mind. The shutters shut, the curtains drawn, the piano open, the desks set and the music sorted; John Bauer rosining his violoncello bow; Uncle Louis screwing up his beloved flute, and descanting volubly in German on some disputed tempo, or the overcoming of a difficult passage, breaking off to kiss Aunt Amelia's hand and lead her to the instrument, there to forget all her sordid cares in the ideal realm of divine harmony.

Would Sophia despise these friendly little meetings, and turn from them with disgust? Then an undeveloped germ of thought rose in the mind of the artless little woman.

What a glorious ending it would be to all her troubles, if Sophia and John Bauer were married!



CHAPTER IX.

THAT Aunt Amelia meant more than she said about John Bauer was evident to Sophia. This conviction deepened her incipient suspicion of her aunt's sincerity.

'I do not see what it signifies if I like Mr Bauer or not. Of course, I must meet the people that come to your house,' was Sophia's cold rejoinder. 'I think, Aunt Amelia, I should like to go to my room,' she added, rising.

How it all jarred upon her nerves! Sophia, utterly unused to the forms of society and sympathies of English life, was inexpressibly wearied by the very intensity of her aunt's efforts to please her.

She asked herself, with dismay, whether she would talk to her every day like this?

‘To be sure, my love,’ said Mrs Winter rising also. ‘How thoughtless I have been to keep you here talking. Come, I will show you the way upstairs.’

Quite naturally Sophia walked first, with a stately step, towards the door. She longed to be alone; she longed for silence, for peace—to be somewhere where she could think of Maitland, recall every word, dwell upon his looks, evoke the remembrance of those grey eyes, so grave and earnest.

Aunt Amelia followed her into the hall. She had gathered up her niece’s cloak and bonnet, and carried them submissively upon her arm. Sophia, accustomed to be waited upon by a crowd of natives, did not even notice it. It was so natural to be waited on.

All the way upstairs Aunt Amelia’s gentle voice was to be heard in a soft treble of excuse.

‘Only a room on the second floor, my love—a long way up. We have not yet been able to furnish the first storey. How much I wish we could lodge you more suitably.’

‘What does it matter where I lodge?’ retorted Sophia, exasperated at her aunt’s

persevering kindness ; ' I shall not complain.'

Arrived on the landing of the second floor, on a level with the Roman emperor, Mrs Winter opened a door to the left, and they entered a large, low room, with two windows—one looking to the front of the house and the lane, the other to the side.

The fog had almost conquered what remained of the short daylight. A thick, heavy vapour was covering all outward objects with a pall. A streak or two of light glimmered low on the horizon, casting a faint yellow reflection upon the boarded floor.

The walls were covered with a faded paper, upon which damp and rain from the roof had left some stains. A few little knick-knacks of Aunt Amelia's manufacture brightened the room a little, otherwise the furniture was shabby in the extreme.

A much-worn-carpet, nailed in the centre of the floor ; a painted deal table, a few decrepit chairs standing against the walls, as if ashamed of themselves ; a chest of drawers ; a glass before the front window, a small bed, with dimity curtains in one corner ; two little shelves with some books. The air felt damp and chill. There was no fire in the grate.

Sophia entered with an assumed indifference. Coming upstairs she had resolved to show nothing that she felt. She owned to herself that her tone in the parlour had been overbearing. What was she at Scatlands but a humble relative, eating the hard crust of another's loaf!

Poor, haughty Sophia! Spite of her resolution, a shudder passed over her at the aspect of her room. Never in her life had she seen anything so squalid.

'Ah, there is no fire!' cried Aunt Amelia,' rapidly reading her thought. 'It shall be lighted, darling. If we had only known you were coming, dearest, but it was your own fault.'

'I am not cold,' she answered languidly. 'Pray light no fire for me. I do not require it.'

Oh, if Aunt Amelia would only go away and leave her! What a bare, miserable house, as naked as a summer bungalow! How dreadful it all was! Now that she was face to face with the life that lay before her, she could have sobbed.

Aunt Amelia was as eager to escape from her niece, as the latter to see her go; but, like many other shy people, she

suffered from a nervous inability to quit any place, be it where it may, in which she found herself.

I fear, my love, you do not like your room?' she began nervously,—then happy to find any excuse, broke off to the arranging of Sophia's wraps upon the bed. 'I chose it for the sake of the view. You cannot see it now, but when clear, you look on the Thames, and Twickenham Meadows and Rosebank.'

Sophia looked up suddenly. 'Rosebank! Is that the house at the end? Can you see Rosebank from here?'

A look of delight spread over her face; and her eyes, a moment before so dull and brooding, caught up the faint rays of yellow light, and threw them back like diamonds.

This sudden change astonished Mrs Winter. For once her niece seemed pleased, yet she could so little imagine why, that she ventured a question.

'Have you ever heard of Rosebank, dear Sophia? The Maitlands live there—our intimate friends. Do you know them?'

'Sophia, smiling to herself a happy smile, and devouring with her eyes the

little that the fog and the twilight left her to contemplate of the trees of Rosebank, hesitated before she answered.

For an instant she wavered. Should she confide in Aunt Amelia, and tell her of her meeting with Maitland? Could she trust her? No! The prejudice that Zebula had implanted in her triumphed. It rose up between them like a wall, only to grow higher and thicker as time went by, shutting out all love and confidence.

‘I—oh no—how could I know the Maitlands? I know no one, Aunt Amelia.’

‘I am going now, my child,’ said Mr Winter with a bewildered smile. The effect of the information she had given about Rosebank was obvious to her; the cause of that effect was hidden. ‘Good-bye,’ she said, more and more bewildered how to get out of the room.

‘Try to love me; try to love us all. Believe me, my dear girl, it will be for our mutual comfort. The love that binds together kith and kin is the sweetest and the safest.’

She pressed her soft lips on her niece’s forehead, and left her still standing by the

window, engrossed with the idea of overlooking Rosebank.

The placid face, the delicate lace cap, the clinging dress, that sat so well on the neat little figure, passed out. The door closed. Aunt Amelia was gone.

Sophia flung herself upon a chair. 'At last, at last,' she cried; 'I am alone!'

After leaving Sophia's room, Mrs Winter slowly descended the polished oak stairs into the hall.

A terrible chill lay at her heart. By nature sensitive and responsive to the point of weakness, she felt that her first meeting with her stately niece had been a failure. Instinct, rather than reflection, told her this. But that it was so came home to her undeniably. Why this should be, was beyond the range of her simple intelligence.

That Sophia should not accept her love, smote her to the quick. It was like treason to the dead brother who had confided her to her care.

Standing in the shadow of the landing of the empty rooms, she paused, and clasping her hands together, addressed a fervent prayer to God that Sophia's heart might be turned towards her.

Again the thought of John Bauer shot through her brain. The idea once started, Mrs Winter dwelt upon it eagerly. Sophia betrayed in all she said and did the habit of wealth—that need of service which comes to the rich like the air they breathe. With John Bauer she would possess every luxury.

By this time Mrs Winter had reached the hall. The clock on the mantelpiece struck five. Five! Uncle Louis would be back from the city directly. She had all sorts of things to do. They kept only two servants, and she was obliged to help them in many ways.

As she turned off towards the dining-room, a latch-key was turning in the lock of the front door; the door flew open, and Mr Winter bounded into the hall.

He was so wrapped up in a large cloak, a white comforter twisted so many times round his neck, and a tall hat, with a very narrow brim, so crushed down upon his head, that nothing of his countenance was visible, except a large and very prominent nose—a nose that leaped, as it were, out of the zone of his face.

Seeing his wife, Mr Winter was about to apostrophise her as usual as ‘My

Amelie!’ Instead, ‘Der Teufel!’ were the words that issued in a muffled sound from the folds of the comforter.

In the impetus of that exceedingly juvenile bound with which he had entered his short, stout legs, ill-supporting his rotund, little person, had struck against Sophia’s box.

‘Der Teufel! Amelia, vat ees das? A man-trap to break dee shins? What is de tevil boxes, my wive?’

Without waiting for an answer, Mr Winter, in his anger, administered a forcible kick on the wood, then stooped down to rub his leg, with a very piteous expression of countenance.

‘Louis, dear Louis, I am so sorry. The box has been forgotten. I ought to have told you—don’t kick it, please; it is—’

‘Ach so! I understand. It ees de box vid de—de enamelled and blue Porcelain von Dresda. Ve vill move ee presently.’

‘It is Sophia Escott’s box—she is come. She arrived this afternoon.’

‘Die Escott—die Sophie! Angekommen—Gott im Himmel! And ze stands there as if noting had happened! Ze keep me avake so many nights to tell of die Sophie—noting but die Sophie, till I dream tau-

sends Sophies all ober die vorld ; and now —ze ees not out of vindows, topside down, vid de news ?’

With frantic haste Mr Winter tore off his wraps, flung down his hat with a bang, dropped the woollen comforter on the stone floor, his great-coat after it ; then, settling his cravat, and passing his large hand through his bristly iron-grey hair (no care bestowed upon it by Aunt Amelia could ever make that hair other than modified horse-hair), he strode up to his wife.

‘ Vere is die schilds ? Vy ees ze not vid her ? ’

So vehement and rapid were his gestures, so quick his movements, that Mrs Winter had hardly time to reply.

‘ Sophia is resting, Louis, in her room ; she is tired after her journey. I have just come down—she preferred to be alone.’

‘ Prefer to be alone ! Nonsense—nonsense ! di talk like von fools, Amalie. Ze shall never be alone, Die Sophie ; ze shall always be vid us. Die Sophie ees come in our old age to be our daughter. Gott sent her. I vill see her—quicks—quicks ! ’

Before he had finished speaking, Uncle Louis’ short legs had carried him half-way

up the staircase, scampering up three steps at a time. Certain ominous sounds descending to the hall betraying that, in his fierce haste, he was slipping on the polished oak of the staircase.

‘Take care, Louis, take care, or you will fall! I will light a candle.’

‘No, no—never more!’ cried Uncle Louis from the landing of the first storey, his voice almost overpowered by the clatter of his boots—‘never more! Sophie—Sophie, my zettel angel, ze vill be my light. Open de door, my Sophie—Sophie!’

Sophia, sitting pensively beside the window, her head bent upon her hand, looking towards Rosebank, heard her name and listened. Something in the intonation of the voice, full of friendly coaxing, attracted her.

A strange flutter came over her; for a moment she felt faint. Since her father had bid her good-night, the last time she saw him alive, she had heard nothing like that voice. She was just rising when, under the application of Uncle Louis’ shoulder, the door suddenly gave way, and Mr Winter burst into the room.

Before she could speak she was within his arms. Kind and gentle was his touch. He murmured some inarticulate words of

fondness, then laid his large, plump hand upon her head. It was like a silent blessing.

‘My Sophie, lie there! Poor schilds, poor schilds!’ He raised her face, and pressed his lips upon her forehead. ‘Lie there,’ and again his arms closed round her; ‘it is ze home.’ Sophia’s head dropped upon his shoulder. She burst into tears. ‘Ze must not cry, Sophie—not cry, not cry. Ee ees bad for ze eyes to cry.’ As this excellent advice was administered between audible sobs from himself, it did not produce much effect. Big tears rolled down his red cheeks upon Sophia’s face.

Tenderly supporting her with one hand, as she clung to him, resting in his warm embrace like a weary child upon the full, soft bosom of its nurse, he was constrained, with the other hand, to take from his pocket that large red handkerchief, which in all crises of his chequered life floated about him like a banner. With it he wiped his eyes, blew his nose, with a noise like a trumpet, replaced it carefully in his pocket, raised Sophia, gazed at her steadfastly in the dark room, then shook his head.

‘Oh, Uncle Louis!’ was all she could say.

‘Uncle Louis cannot zee die schilds die Sophie; but he can feel her. He is sure she is loofly.’

Mr Winter laid back the long silken tresses of her hair upon his arm, smoothed them, kissed them, then patted them down into their place on each side of her head.

‘Now, ze must not cry no more,’ he said, observing the convulsive heaves that heaved Sophia’s bosom; ‘ze must be die good brave girls.’

‘Oh, Uncle Louis!’ again exclaimed Sophia, somewhat more composed; ‘I cry because you put me in mind of him—of dear, dear papa.’

‘Dat is goot, ver goot,’ he said gravely. ‘I will be de papa, Sophie, to ze—always de papa.’

Neither saw the other, save as an indistinct form in an unlighted room; but Sophia had felt the love that came to her in Uncle Louis’ large encircling arms; felt it, and responded to it.

At this moment Aunt Amelia entered, carrying in her hand a light. In an instant Sophia was standing upright, hastily removing all traces of tears from her cheeks.

‘My Amalie!’ said Mr Winter; ‘we have had ze kees of peace; is it not so, Sophie?’

‘Yes, Uncle Louis.’

The frank, sweet tones of the girl’s voice came as an astonishment to Aunt Amelia.

‘Let me look at zee,’ said Mr Winter, with great solemnity, taking the light from his wife. ‘Ach, so!’ and he drew back sideways, contemplating her as if she had been a picture by an old master, his small, grey eyes all the while twinkling with fun.

‘Ach schön! Schön! Herrlich schön! An original! no damned copies!’ he exclaimed, passing the candle up and down. ‘And so fine, so tall! Beautiful, beautiful!’

He burst into a merry laugh, that rang through the room.

‘My Amalie!’ he said, giving back the light to his wife; ‘zee must shut ee up or die; young men will steal the beautiful schilds. Zee must be shut up, my Sophie,’ continued Uncle Louis, giggling, as he carried out his thought.

‘I will be de Cerberus, vid de chain. Such fun, such fun! Ha, ha! Ve will mock at di young men, and play and sing all day. You can play die musicks, my Sophie?’ he asked, very gravely. Anything about music was sacred.

‘ Yes, Uncle Louis.’

‘ Goot, goot ; vid die music von is never triste, never dull.’

Between everything he said, Mr Winter—his big nose in the air—took long glances at his niece ; standing on the points of his toes, throwing up his fat hands, and shrugging his broad shoulders in little spasms of delight. There was a simple flattery in all this that charmed Sophia. She laughed as she looked at him.

‘ I told you, Sophia, you would like Uncle Louis,’ said Aunt Amelia, a placid smile lighting up her kind face.

The sound of her voice recalled Sophia to a recollection of her presence. Suddenly she fixed her eyes on her.

‘ Uncle Louis shows that he loves me, —I cannot doubt it.’

Mrs Winter turned away, too much hurt to care to show it. Suffer what she might, she mentally resolved that she would not, by so much as a gesture, strike a discord in the harmony of this first meeting.

There had been a painful pause. Uncle Louis raised his head, and looked from one to the other. Something struck him as wrong ; but he did not give himself the trouble to think what it might be.

Drawing them both towards him, he encircled them with his arms, his big nose and little eyes shining on both.

‘My Amalie loofe die, Sophia, like a mother die; Sophie, honour her as die tochter,’ he added solemnly.

Sophia tried to disengage herself. He would not let her go—

‘Come; it ees cold in dees room; come down wid die tante and me.’

‘No, Uncle Louis, thank you,’ said Sophia, struggling to free herself from his grasp. ‘I will stay up here, please, to-night; I am tired.’

‘Ee can be tired down stairs; I must have die Sophie.’ He endeavoured to drag her forcibly towards the door: ‘I want to look at ee!’

‘My dear Louis,’ interposed Mrs Winter, from the other end of the room, where she had been lighting Sophia’s candles and closing the window-shutters. Aunt Amelia had a quiet way of waiting upon her that was quite touching in its unconscious humility.

‘Do not worry Sophia. Let her do as she likes.’

‘Uncle Louis does not worry me,’ she replied quickly, taking his large fat hand

in hers and kissing it. 'He can never, never worry me. But just for to-night, Uncle Louis, only to-night.'

'Come away, my love,' said Mrs Winter. (A pang of anguish passed through her, as the conviction of Sophia's dislike forced itself more and more upon her.)

'Zee promise to come down in die morning, like die Aurore, to de poor old uncle, before he goes to make de bread of live in de city, nicht wahr,' said Mr Winter, in his turn trying to liberate himself from his wife, with a smile that extended his large mouth across his face.

'Amelie, be off, or I will shoot you dead. Set di example to die Sophie how zee minds me.'

His genial voice fell on Aunt Amelia's ears like balm.

'Yes, yes,' said Sophia, advancing to the door where her aunt had drawn him. 'I will come down to-morrow. Good night.'

'Gute nacht, my schilds'—a substantial kiss following, that might have been heard all over the house. Then with many deep-toned 'Achs!' and 'Zo's!' and 'Lebewohl's' Uncle Louis permitted himself to be conducted downstairs.



CHAPTER X.

WHEN Edward Maitland parted from Sophia before the door of Scatlands, he walked on very slowly and deliberately to Rosebank.

Passing the lodge he left the well-rolled drive that meandered by clumps of forest trees and mossy herbage, and took a circuitous path upon the soft turf that spread to the right, through a laurel shrubbery.

Thick as was the fog, Edward would not trust to it to conceal his arrival. His father, a mercantile philosopher, who required to ruminate in the open air over his speculations in the city,—often returned early, and might be encountered prowling about among the trees. Or Miss Sterne, with her fair curls and inaudible

walk, might be gliding along the road on some commission of his mother's.

Now, of all people in the world, he specially desired at this moment to avoid Miss Sterne.

So, treading lightly on the springy turf, Maitland turned into the path leading through the thick plantation of laurels shrouding the house on that side; and with his own key opened the door of his particular sanctum. He longed to be alone.

The walls of this room were a record of his life. Between the windows, under a glass case, was his first shoe, of blue kid, creased and marked with the impress of the fat little foot which had worn it; a most aggravating memento, which he had continually threatened to destroy, but had been restrained by the earnest entreaties of his mother, who had carefully collected and preserved (as in a museum) every remembrance of his childhood.

Here were the bow and arrows with which he had shot magpies and tormented his nurses,—the miniature cutter, rigged with spotless sails, which he had launched on the bosom of the Thames,—a series of hunting prints in bright colours, flanking a portrait of himself, aged ten, in a blue

jacket, leaning against his mother's side, whose head, for want of due perspective, he appeared to threaten with a whip—she smiling the while blandly. His first gun suspended over the mantelpiece; foils and boxing-gloves; a blackbird—shot by his hand—stuffed, in a cage. His Eton prize books, in brilliant bindings, ranged on shelves; a choice collection of other books in a recess; an academic cap and gown—which he had lately worn in theatricals—hanging on a nail; some casts of different Venuses from the antique on brackets; a pair of white cricketing shoes, and a jersey on the floor, where he had left it.

In one corner of the room stood a writing-table, on which lay pipes and meerschaums, side by side with packets of dusty letters and pamphlets, open, as he had last laid them.

A well-worn arm-chair was drawn up near the window, and beside it a little inlaid table of mosaic and gold, on which was placed a delicate vase of Dresden china, filled with choice hot-house flowers. Whether Edward was absent or at home, that vase was daily replenished by his mother's own hands, and placed on the table as on a shrine sacred to her son.

On entering, Edward's eye caught the bright hue of the flowers. He smiled.

'Poor mater! Always the same, always good to me!' was his thought.

The force of habit caused him to draw out the arm-chair, and seat himself before the empty grate. His countenance, like his attitude, was grave and full of thought.

For the first time in his life he had shunned his mother. Before, he had always sought her with a schoolboy's ardour, poured into her ear every minute detail of his life, and joyfully answered her interminable questions.

But now, not only did he avoid her, but he actually dreaded meeting her.

Sophia Escott's name might be mentioned,—she might be discussed as an ordinary subject of conversation. Fresh from the seduction of her presence, he could not bear it. He must accustom himself, little by little, to consider her as an ordinary mortal. At this moment, she seemed to him some bright vision from another sphere.

Instinctively he trembled at what his mother might be led to say. For the first time he realised that their views were often antagonistic. About Sophia Escott he felt

intuitively that they would be. Mrs Maitland would not express herself as he desired. Who, indeed, could speak in words such as he would consider adequate?

The vague delicious sense of what Sophia was,—of what she might be to him—who could express it? The bliss of having lived until that moment,—who but himself could understand? Sophia had swept like a magnificent harmony upon every tone of his deep, earnest nature,—she had satisfied every requirement of his fastidious taste.

Hitherto, he had shrunk from the young ladies of ordinary life, mere creatures of flesh and blood,—talking, dancing, laughing, flirting,—like educated animals without a soul. Even now he shuddered, as he recalled with vivid indignation the persecutions to which he had been subjected by marriageable girls. All this he could not explain to his mother. For the first time he must have a secret from her. Poor mater!

He glanced at the flowers, and a sigh escaped him. Yet so it must be. The inevitable moment had come when, like the strong-winged young eaglet, he must forsake the parent nest that had hitherto sheltered him, and soar out alone in the air of freedom, into a new world.

To have met Sophia Escott! To be called her friend! Exquisite happiness! Yet it was not as a friend that he would approach her! The sombre flash of her tragic eyes still rested on him! The turmoil of his blood was not yet cooled as he recalled her stately presence standing erect in the muddy road,—the misty earth and cloudy sky but a background for her beauty. Her friend! No, indeed! She was a being born to be worshipped, or—never to be beheld again!

In a moment of painful excitement, she had laid bare her heart. Years could not have shown her to him so plainly. And what a revelation! The innate nobility of her nature had proclaimed itself in every word. The dignity of her bearing was but the mould to the lofty candour of her soul.

‘Not for her sake, but for mine, thank Heaven she has lost her fortune!’

Carried away by the intensity of his feelings, Edward raised his head, and let his hand fall heavily on the table opposite. Oh, God! To have her love! To call her his! Every pulse in his body beat wildly.

From this transport of love his thoughts again glanced off to his mother.

Again his eyes rested on the fresh flowers

her hand had placed on his table. Their delicate fragrance came to him like a mute appeal. From the hour of his birth, her devotion had been so absolute, her affection so boundless, that up to this time he had never disputed her right to control him.

That his mother's ambition had led her to anticipate the possibility of a marriage with the great Indian heiress, he knew. He had often indignantly combated the idea. Why should Miss Escott select him from the crowd of pretenders whom her wealth was sure to attract? Or why should he like her well enough to marry her? All this he had argued over and over again with his mother; but in vain.

Now, the position was changed. Miss Escott was no longer an heiress. The reproach of her father's ruin was attached to her. How would his mother accept this change?

His brow clouded. He beat uneasily with his hands on the arms of the chair; then rose and paced restlessly up and down the room.

As yet he was free. Father and mother were very dear to him, and the principle of filial duty paramount. Was he, an

only son, justified in voluntarily flinging himself into circumstances which might bring him into collision with them? (What Mrs Maitland said, her husband echoed.)

Yet, to resign Sophia! To see others approach her; to know her wooed—perhaps won! The thought was maddening! In the passion of his first love he swore to himself, that as she stood before him in the glory of her beauty, forgetting all else, he would fling himself at her feet, and implore her to permit him to dedicate his life to her.





CHAPTER XI.

AT this moment there was a sound of steps in the passage leading to his room ; the sweep of a rich silk dress was heard upon the stone pavement.

‘Edward ! Edward !’ cried his mother’s voice outside. ‘Where are you ?’

‘Here, mother !’ he answered, starting forward to open the door.

Before he could reach it, Mrs Maitland had entered, and was clasping him within her ample arms. Then she drew back and looked at him.

‘Why, Edward, what a colour ! You are handsomer than ever !’

Maitland’s cheek flushed still more deeply.

‘But how strange ! Why did you not come to me at once ? My own boy !’

and again Mrs Maitland's arms were round his neck. 'I should not have known you were here but for Miss Sterne. The lodge people saw you pass and told her. She ran home directly, quite out of breath. Something was said about a lady. Miss Sterne was quite puzzled. She thought it most extraordinary.'

'The devil take Miss Sterne!' was Maitland's mental ejaculation. Aloud,— 'She is very kind to interest herself so much about me.' The irony of the words was not intended to hide his displeasure. 'Does it not strike you, mother, that Miss Sterne is very officious?'

'No! no! Invaluable! Always consulting my tastes and feelings.'

'Do not trust her too much, mater. You may repent it.' His manner implied more than his words. 'Do not trust her!' he added earnestly.

But his warning was thrown away upon Mrs Maitland.

'Edward, you are quarrelling with poor Miss Sterne because she has found you out. She knew you were in the house, and came to tell me. Perfectly natural! Why did you not come yourself? Who is the lady?'

‘No lady entered the grounds with me.’ Edward forced out the words reluctantly, feeling himself in a glow from head to foot. What demon of ill luck could have condemned him, at that moment, to hear his mother allude to Sophia? ‘I was very tired and came in here to rest and have a smoke.’

‘But there is no smell of tobacco,’ and Mrs Maitland sniffed the air energetically. ‘I don’t believe it, dear.’ And fixing her eyes upon her son, she shook her head. ‘This is most extraordinary, and so unkind! You knew I was expecting you—anxiously expecting you!’

‘Not unkind, mother; never unkind to you,’ replied Edward, as she sank into a chair.

His voice softened as he addressed her. In a moment he was stooping over her and kissing her. She gazed up at his tall, elegant figure, and frank manly face, with maternal pride. But she was not to be got over in that fashion. There was a fact to be elucidated—an important fact affecting her son, and her mind was working in an agony of suspense.

Edward, she began, riveting her large, prominent eyes upon him in a determined

stare. 'Why did you not come to me at once, as you have always done before?'

He hesitated.

'My dear boy, you are not going to have secrets from me?'

This persistence made Edward more and more reluctant to mention Sophia's name. In his present mood, he would have said anything, short of an actual untruth, to conceal that he had met her—much more the manner of his meeting.

Receiving no answer, Mrs Maitland repeated her question.

'Edward, Edward, what are you hiding from me?'

'Really, mother—I am—well, I am not hiding anything.'

'Yes, you are,' she replied firmly. 'It is no use denying it. Speak to me, Edward; you are making me inexpressibly wretched!'

With one hand she drew out her handkerchief, and with the other seized his arm.

'There is nothing to make you wretched, dear mother,' Edward replied, again kissing her.

'But, if there is nothing to hide, why don't you answer my question?'

‘Indeed, mother, you are making a foolish fuss about nothing. I am sorry I came first into this room, if it vexes you. I will never do so again, I promise you.’

He took her hand to lead her away, but with an ominous shake of the head, she refused to stir.

‘Will you tell your father, Edward? Is it anything I ought not to hear? Oh! have you done anything dreadful?’

‘Mother! What are you saying? I repeat I have done nothing.’

‘Thank Heaven!’ she ejaculated. ‘Where did you come from this morning?’

‘From Oxford,’ was his answer, smiling at her.

‘Did you come alone?’

‘Yes, mother; quite alone. I drove down in a gig with Walters’ man, Ben, from London.’

‘In a gig? I heard no wheels!’

‘Because I got out at the top of the lane.’

‘Were you alone, or in company?’

It was useless. He must speak,—tell her everything. He had much better have done so at once. Now the very thing he desired to avoid had occurred; he had excited her suspicions.

‘I was not alone when I came down the lane.’ That he spoke unwillingly required no penetration to detect, nor that he had crimsoned to the roots of his hair. Fortunately the room had grown so dark that Mrs Maitland’s keen vision saw neither this, nor the troubled expression of his countenance.

‘Not alone, Edward?’ She rose from her chair, and grasped him by the arm. ‘*Who* was with you?’

‘Really, mother, this is too absurd!’ He tried to laugh, but failed under the angry flare of his mother’s eyes. ‘At the top of the lane I met Miss Escott. I had the pleasure of escorting her to her uncle’s door.’

‘Miss Escott?—Sophia Escott? Is she come? Why did you not tell me?’

‘Because—because—’ Edward’s voice dropped. There was no reason that he could give. Fortunately she did not wait for his answer. Her curiosity was too imperative.

‘What is Miss Escott like, Edward? Tell me the truth.’

‘I always tell you the truth, mater. She is a regal-looking girl.’

‘Regal-looking! Do you admire regal beauty?’

‘I admire Miss Escott beyond expression,’ was his prompt reply.

‘That is because you have heard so much about her ; there is a great deal in that. Probably I shall not agree with you ; I feel sure, indeed, that I shall not.’

‘There cannot be two opinions about Miss Escott, mother. Her beauty is too decided to admit of doubt.’

‘Now, Edward’ (Mrs Maitland was still holding him tightly by the arm. Nothing but the dim outline of their two figures was visible in the dark room), ‘do you know that she has lost all her money, and is coming to the Winters’ as a dependant ?’

‘She told me so.’

‘Told you so the first time she saw you !’ exclaimed Mrs Maitland aghast. ‘She must be a very bold, ill-bred young woman !’

‘Mother ! Not a word against her, I entreat you ! All that Miss Escott does becomes her.’

‘Why, Edward, what do you know about her ? You only saw her to-day !’

‘Just as you know her, mother ; I have heard so much before. How often have you discussed her ; how you have extolled

her. You seem to forget this ; I do not. But Miss Escott in herself is far beyond all that has been said of her. What has loss of fortune to do with her beauty or her qualities? *She* is unchanged. You are unjust, mater !’

Mrs Maitland, dissolved in tears, sank into a chair.

‘Not at all! Not at all!’ cried she, raising herself upright. ‘I hear a very different account of her ;—a fiendish temper, inherited from her Indian mother, cruel, overbearing, ruined by indulgence! I pity poor Mrs Winter! Besides, Miss Escott’s father has committed suicide.’

‘Committed suicide! She did not tell me that! Poor girl! how noble is her fortitude! How she will need all our support! I pity her; beyond all words I pity her!’

The inflection of Edward’s voice, even more than the words, smote his mother with dismay.

‘For God’s sake, Edward, do not allow yourself to become entangled! She shall have no support from me.’

‘But, mother, you have not seen her. All your prejudices will vanish when you meet.’

‘I do not want to meet her. I will not see her! I hate her already! Do not ask me to receive her; I shall be rude to her. My love for you will make me so.’

Edward stood speechless before his mother.

‘I tell you plainly,’ she continued, a convulsive sob now and then breaking her words, ‘that, under present circumstances, it is a connection that neither your father nor I could sanction. Understand this! Of course the Winters would like it. They have lost Miss Escott’s money; they would have yours instead.’

Edward drew away suddenly from his mother’s side. She could not distinguish the expression of his face, but she interpreted the movement. Now, he was pacing slowly up and down the room. His silence encouraged her to continue,—

‘Miss Escott thinks you are rich, and she knows she is penniless. Never could I listen to the idea of a marriage with her, nor would your father.’

‘Who talks of marriage?’ cried Edward, a sternness in his voice which Mrs Maitland had never heard before. ‘But, remember, that the name of Miss Escott is sacred to me. Say nothing of her that

will make me forget the respect I owe you.'

'This from you, Edward!—and about a stranger! You surprise me! Before you have been an hour in the house to address such language to me! This is Miss Escott's doing—wretched girl! Why does she come here to divide us? Listen to me, Edward. You are our only son; your father has slaved for your sake, ever since you were born. I have helped him. He is slaving still to make you a wealthy man. Years passed before we had a child. Our son was to be all that we were not—elegant, learned, accomplished—a member of Parliament, a peer perhaps—the founder of a family. All this is possible, for you have exceeded all our expectations; no one has such a son. Is there anything astonishing in our wishing to see you the head of a family when we are gone?' Then, in a coaxing tone,—'*You will* reward us for all our sacrifices, will you not, Edward?'

Maitland stopped pacing up and down the room, and retreated to the window. Hitherto, like most young men, it had seemed to him that he was free to marry whom he liked, and he had it on his lips

to say that a man chose a wife for himself—not for his parents.

But his mother's words presented to him his position in a new light. In a moment, all unprepared, he was called upon to solve the problem of where filial obedience ought to end and manly liberty assert itself. If he had known more of Sophia! If he had been sure she could have loved him! But he knew nothing.

On the other hand, he acknowledged how true was all his mother said. He was well aware of the devotion of both his parents, and to what a degree their life was bound up in his own. Was he prepared to marry without their approbation? A cold struck to his heart. He began to feel like a criminal.

‘Surely all this is premature,’ sighed he. ‘I have seen Miss Escott once,—you not at all. I expect your opinion will change.’

‘Never!’ was the prompt reply; ‘I will never set eyes upon her. She is scheming to take from me my only son.’

‘Mother, mother, you will drive me from the room.’

Rebuked, but determined, Mrs Maitland's voice softened.

‘I only act for your good, Edward. What other motive can I have? I can only think of my dear son—what is more natural? Would you reproach me for it? Promise me’—and Mrs Maitland seized both his hands and pressed them in her own—‘that you will not marry without our consent. There is yet time. Nothing can have yet passed between you and Miss Escott.’

Real tears were streaming from Mrs Maitland’s eyes, her hands were held up beseechingly. Beside the window Edward stood, rigid as a statue. The gloom without seemed to be closing round his very life-strings. Many voices spoke within him. The loudest said, ‘Beware!’ How could he listen? His mother’s impatience gave him no time.

‘Is it so much,’ she pleaded, ‘to ask an only son, that he will not destroy his parents’ home?’

She could scarcely speak for sobs; she clung to him imploringly. These were the first tears he had ever drawn from her eyes; they smote him to the soul. He loved her dearly. All his thoughts, all his affections had hitherto centred in her. He had never asked himself if she had

deserved this. She was his mother; that had been enough for him. Suddenly an overwhelming feeling of shame came over him, that any conduct of his should humiliate her. He drew her to him and kissed her hand.

‘Dry your eyes, mother; I cannot bear to see you weep. I promise what you ask, but be merciful.’

What had he said? He listened in terror to the echo of his own words.

‘But that is not enough, Edward. I want to know that you are safe. On my knees—’

She was about to cast herself on the floor, but he caught her in his arms and prevented her. Gently he replaced her on her chair; but though gentle, his manner was constrained.

‘There is no need to alarm yourself, mother. I am quite free. I will try to obey you.’

So tremulous was his voice, so hollow, that it seemed not his own, but another’s.

‘My own boy! My darling!’ cried Mrs Maitland, throwing her rotund arms round him in an effusion of joy. ‘No mother ever had such a son! How happy you make me! From the day of

your birth you have always made me happy !'

Edward could not answer. He submitted in silence to the voluminous carresses lavished on him ; all the time trying to realise what he really had promised. Had he resigned all liberty of action ?

There was a sound of footsteps in the hall. It broke the awkward silence of the darkened chamber, where mother and son stood side by side, neither understanding what was passing in the other's mind.

'Do you hear?' whispered Mrs Maitland. 'That is your father's step in the hall ! He has just returned. Not a word of all this to him ! He comes home tired ; it would disturb him. Come along, Edward ; this dark room is dismal !'

Passively Edward followed her through the door. Her jubilation terrified him ! How did she understand his promise ? What did she mean ? He dared not ask her.





CHAPTER XII.



HERE was always an ample dinner at Rosebank—of the substantial kind—partaken of in a panelled room, with an oriel window jutting into the garden; a modern room of course, but doing its utmost to look ancient and gloomy, with mediæval furniture and pictures, bought in Wardour Street.

Mrs Maitland, among her lady-like virtues, included a love of good eating. Indeed, her early vocation in life was doubtful, and Mrs Shorne, the clergyman's wife, whom she had often offended, by reason of the rigid manner in which she had repulsed her advances to her son, declared that she had been a cook—cook to Mr Maitland in the city.

But these are mysteries which do not concern the present story.

Mr Maitland, always bringing with him an excellent appetite from the city, fell into a habit of good eating also: yet a plainer, homelier man never was created than Nathaniel Maitland, Esq., merchant and broker of Threadneedle Street, City.

He had, by dint of sheer perseverance and honesty, risen from being an under clerk in a broker's office, to be a name and power on 'Change.

He was very like a mechanic in appearance. A dark, common-place face, with bushy whiskers, a large mouth, which broke readily into a good-natured smile, a large head, partly bald, with a fringe of black hair, turning grey. A tall, awkward person, and large hands and feet.

Neither the persuasions nor the reproaches of his wife could induce him to wear proper clothes.

He was always to be seen in a rusty black coat, a long white cravat, never over clean, uncommonly seedy trousers, and a battered hat.

When it was cold, he would retain as an overcoat the round, short cape and long skirts buttoned to the knees, which come

down to us in the wooden figures of the ark, as the legendary costume of Shem, Ham, and Japhet.

No one, in the memory of man, had ever seen him in a new coat or a decent hat. If he ever put them on, he must have gone out into the grounds secretly in the rain, and reduced them to their usual condition. How he did it was his secret ; but it was done.

As he never could be persuaded to enter a church, he appeared no better dressed on Sunday.

All this was a standing grievance to Mrs Maitland. She had even urged the injustice such a disregard to appearances was to Edward. But at this Mr Maitland would only chuckle and walk away ; invariably bringing back from the city a new dress, with which he presented her.

In the evening his appearance did rather improve, for his wife had, on so many occasions, punished him by refusing to sit down to table with him, that as he was generally very hungry, he had permitted himself to be invested in clean linen and a dress coat.

The table was covered with heavy and showy plate. A patriarchal butler blandly

dispensed blessings in the shape of meat and drink of first-class quality to the four individuals who, with an acre of snowy table-cloth between, and much display of glass, sat down as solemnly as if it were to a religious function.

Dinner was the only period of the day during which Mrs Maitland's thirst for information was quiescent. At dinner she asked no questions. Beside her lay a case of little tablets and a pencil, on which she noted her various remarks on the execution of the dishes; now and then addressing a half-aside observation to Miss Sterne, whose furtive eyes, modestly shrouded by the pale ringlets, took that precise shade of colour in reply indicated by her patroness.

Mr Maitland's duties were confined to pronouncing an elaborate grace in a mumbling tone—then carving with unbroken taciturnity such joints as were placed before him by the butler, and consuming his own portion in silence.

About this butler there had been many, what the Americans term—'difficulties,' between Mr Maitland and the wife of his bosom. Mr Maitland, accustomed to female attendants in his 'poor days,' insisted on a 'parlour-maid.' 'He would

not be served by a d— flunky grinning at him behind his chair.'

Certainly when, after Mrs Maitland's victory, the patriarchal butler was introduced at Rosebank, there was no denying he looked the master of the house all over. Mr Maitland felt this, so he never opened his lips in the man's presence when he could help it. Mrs Maitland liked it, so the butler remained, and Mr Maitland, out of pure shyness, deprived himself of many a second helping. Indeed, his whole demeanour at his own table was that of an unwelcome guest, not at all certain of his reception.

On the present occasion, after the termination of the second course, Mr Maitland, watching the temporary exit of the butler, raised his eyes to the rotund countenance of his wife,—seated a long way off, opposite to him,—and drank her health, with as absolute a formality as if he had seen her for the first time.

He had been duly schooled to this little ceremony. His whole behaviour, indeed, at table was the result of long years of matrimonial instruction. That he should have acquired some perfection in the prescribed code was therefore not surprising.

When he had drunk Mrs Maitland's health, and received equally formal acknowledgment, he silently caused his glass to be filled again, and in a more impulsive manner, turned towards Edward—at that moment eyeing, with an abstracted glance the flowers of a huge epergne placed in the centre of the table.

'Your very good health, my dear boy! Happy to see you home. We are very dull without you.'

Having ventured upon this little sentence quite out of his own head, Mr Maitland eyed his wife from under his bushy eyebrows, to mark its effect upon her. Greatly to his relief she evinced no outward sign of disapproval.

'Thank you, dear father,' returned Edward, with difficulty detaching his eyes from a bright point in the epergne, where they had fixed themselves, in utter forgetfulness of all around.

Encouraged by the placidity of Mrs Maitland's aspect, her husband, with an instinct of genuine good-breeding, fearing that Miss Sterne might feel herself neglected, was about to drink her health also. But here his guardian angel stepped in and kindly prevented him.

From a certain unaccountable tremor apparent in her whole manner, Miss Sterne seemed, at that moment, as desirous to be obliterated, as Mrs Maitland could possibly wish she should be.

As Edward had withdrawn his eyes to fix them on his father, he had become conscious that Miss Sterne was furtively studying him through the leaves of the artificial flowers.

When he raised his eyes, she dropped hers with a kind of guilty haste—her face folding itself up, as it were, under her blonde ringlets, in impenetrable mystery.

Mrs Maitland found so much to note on her tablets to-day respecting the cook's delinquencies, that she was unusually silent. Five whole minutes had elapsed before the apple-sauce was handed round after the fragrant goose had been served in all its integrity, with accompaniment of onion, herbs, bread-crumbs, and rich gravy. Five whole minutes! Disgraceful!

Then the meat in the curry was tough; the calves'-foot jelly toppled over ignominiously as it entered the room! And the tarts! What was the matter with the tarts? Mrs Maitland helped herself to another,—eating it thoughtfully in order to discover.

‘Oh!’ she cried, so suddenly, as to cause Mr Maitland almost to jump from his chair, and Edward and Miss Sterne to start, and, without knowing, look at each other. ‘Oh! I have found it out!’

‘Found what out?’ asked Mr Maitland, re-seating himself.

‘The jam is sour! It won’t do. Jemima must go.’

‘Is that all?’ replied the master of the house from the bottom of the table. ‘Send her away if you like, my dear; but don’t startle me at dinner. I do like to be quiet at meals.’

‘Impossible, Mr Maitland; impossible, with such a cook!’

‘Well, well, my dear; write it all down, only be quiet now; let me enjoy myself. The only time in the day when I can sit quiet is dinner.’

The sound of Mrs Maitland’s pencil scratching over the paper—she wrote as she talked—in bold, unformed letters, and jerky, sententious sentences, and the stealthy tread of the patriarchal butler, pursuing his avocation upon the surface of the Turkey carpet, like a conspirator, was all that was now audible. Mrs Maitland being present, no one cared to lead

the conversation; certainly not Edward, whose far-off look and absent manner marked his abstraction.

Once or twice his father glanced anxiously at him and then at his wife, catching glimpses of her face sideways between the flowers in the epergne.

But as Mrs Maitland seemed perfectly satisfied, the good man supposed that all was as it should be. He knew that, as a rule, his wife did not encourage him to talk at table. So easy a mode of showing his marital compliance was—with a good dinner before him, and the choicest of wine placed on a dumb waiter, without troubling the butler—not distasteful.

The same taciturnity continued when they left the dining-room, and one by one entered the 'saloon,' divided from it by folding-doors, solemnly thrown open at the moment Mrs Maitland rose from the table.

Why this room, painted white and panelled with gold and brocaded silk, the ornamentation ending in a massive gold cornice and a profusion of glass chandeliers, should be so called, Mrs Maitland alone could tell. But her orders were strict. One housemaid had lost her place

because she persistently called the 'saloon' 'the parlour.' This was too much for Mrs Maitland.

Mr Maitland, not daring to be comfortable in his own homely way, and crack his little jokes with Edward in the presence of his wife, extended himself in a large arm-chair before the fire, folded his arms, put his feet on the fender, and stared at the coals.

Mrs Maitland, with an instinct rather than a feeling that her victory over Edward had been dearly won, and that it would be well to leave him to himself, after the painful interview they had had, instead of sitting by him, as was her wont, and somewhat overwhelming him by her caresses and her admiration, while she questioned him about all in which he was concerned—the ordering of his rooms, his cook's expenses, his clothes, his washer-woman (who on many occasions had offended her nice eye when she unpacked his clothes), the parties to which he had been invited, what young ladies he had danced with, and who had made love to him, as she termed it (he always, in his turn, protesting against the idea), to what noblemen he had been introduced, if they liked him,

and had invited him to their homes—these questions, always accompanied by many recommendations to avoid second-rate society and needy friends, as likely to impede the triumphant progress she contemplated for him in life—had retired with Miss Sterne into a corner, and seating herself on a divan, prepared, in vulgar phrase, to ‘have her talk out’ about Sophia Escott, while, with feverish activity she stitched at an embroidery frame.

It was not often that any event disturbed the tranquillity of her life at Rosebank. Now, with Edward’s strange infatuation towards the stranger, she seemed drifting into the excitement of a perfect drama.

Talk she must, if not to Edward to Miss Sterne, whose pale eyes glittered with an unusual brightness.

Occasional words, bursts of conversation, came to Edward’s ears as he sat by the fire, affecting to read a newspaper, not one word of which he saw. For, alas! he knew his mother too well not to guess the subject of her earnest conversation. He would at once have gone out but for his father, who, he knew beforehand, as long as he remained awake, would insist on having him near him.

‘Conceive—dreadful—suicide!’ reached Edward, in what his mother intended to be a whisper, her head turned away, in the pauses of her stitches, towards her companion, also engaged in some minute embroidery, overshadowed by her ringlets.

‘Disgusting!’ echoed the latter, softly.

‘Two brothers, they say—shot one after the other! Hereditary insanity!’

‘What has she come here for?’ asked Mrs Maitland in a louder key.

‘Daily governess?’ suggested Miss Sterne, *sotto voce*.

‘No, no! quite unfitted. Sets up for beauty—temper—extravagance.’

‘Husband?’ put in the other; and as she spoke, she shot a strange glance towards the place where Edward, invisible behind his newspaper, was suffering torture.

‘Husband!’ exclaimed Mrs Maitland in a distinct tone.

It must be observed that she was under the impression that she was quite inaudible to every one but Miss Sterne.

‘Who would have her?’

Edward moved uneasily in his chair, noisily unfolded the sheets of the newspaper, and poked the already blazing fire, but all was quite thrown away upon his mother.

‘Consider — parents — connection — pauper—’

Here her voice dropped into her work-frame, in the taking of a long stitch of red silk for the formation of a rose.

‘Pauper!’ Miss Sterne was heard to echo. ‘Disgraceful!’ This was added, leaning back against the divan, and turning her eyes stealthily in the direction of Edward.

‘I shall take no notice of her!’ Mrs Maitland continued, almost in her natural voice, forgetting what was due to her son’s presence in the excitement of the subject, and the difficulty of forming a particular rose-leaf, on account of a knot in the floss silk, at which she tugged energetically. ‘I shall not see her. Advise Mrs Winter—get rid —immediately—’

The clear, harsh voice again subsided into the frame.

Miss Sterne here whispered something into Mrs Maitland’s ear. Mrs Maitland, smiling, nodded her head repeatedly—the red floss silk suspended in her fingers in her anxiety to catch every syllable of her communication.

All this was agony to Edward. As the snatches of conversation reached him, he

grew more and more displeased. Had he imagined that his mother intended him to hear what she was saying, he would not only have left the room, but the house. but he knew her foibles and could make allowances. Yet he felt, and that strongly, that after the sacrifice he had just made, she ought not to have exposed him to the chance of overhearing such a conversation.

Miss Sterne, too, discussing Miss Escott in his very presence! Miss Sterne daring even to allude to Sophia! It was intolerable!

With his mother it was different. He had too often had reason to deplore her want of delicacy. Now he resented it. Starting up from his chair and crushing the outspread newspaper in his hands, he turned and cast an agitated look in the direction of the divan.

Quite useless! Mrs Maitland, her ear still lowered towards Miss Sterne, every feature bent into listening, looked up sharply, the premature hollows of her companion's face apparent as she moved her thin-lipped mouth.

‘What a noise you are making, my dear Edward! cried Mrs Maitland.’ ‘Do be quiet, or you will make your father—’

Then, replacing herself in the same position as before, she again turned her ear towards her companion.

Mr Maitland, senior, who had been nodding, here woke up.

‘Anything wrong, my dear boy?’ he asked huskily, looking steadfastly into his son’s face. ‘You are pale, Teddy! Been betting—? in disgrace with the Dons?’

‘No father; thank you.’

‘Is Edward well, my dear?’ asked Mr Maitland, leaning over in the direction of his wife. ‘He looks fagged.’

‘Oh dear, yes—quite well,’ answered Mrs Maitland. ‘Leave him alone! There is nothing the matter with you, is there, dear Edward?’ after a pause.

‘Nothing the matter with my *health*, mater,’ he answered reproachfully. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘It is not I—it is your father?’

Edward put down the paper he had crushed, and crossed over nearer to his father. Mr Maitland was at that moment yawning portentously. Taking a huge gold watch from his fob, he wound it up, yawned again, and then fell into a sleepy survey of his son’s face as he leaned against the mantelpiece.

‘Ah, my boy!’ shaking his head at him with a concentration of wisdom. ‘You should lead my life—slaving in the city all day. Making money is stirring work. Losing it—stirring too. You have to get it back again. Up and down—in and out—down the middle—up again—double shuffle and—why, Edward, you are not listening to me.’

‘I beg your pardon, dear father,’ replied Edward, turning round.

Edward had lived this kind of life between father and mother many years, but it had never struck him before how unutterably dull and useless it was.

‘No time for the high-strikes in business,’ continued Mr Maitland, happy in the consciousness of the butler’s absence. He would not appear again for an hour with the tea, and before that time Mr Maitland would have gone to bed. ‘But you young gentlemen work at nothing but idleness. I never could amuse myself doing nothing.’ Another yawn. ‘Hardest work of all holding a book, or sitting with your hands before you. Long before your age, Edward, I was a clerk in an office in Thames Street. You would not put the sole of your foot there. Up by candle-light

- all winter ; six miles to walk there and back—to Hoxton—and to run about the docks all day, in and out of stinking ships, until my legs felt like tape.

‘ I had to sweep out the office too—no joke that—a nasty, stuffy place—clean the tin candlesticks, sand the floor, and put ink into the inkstands. In winter I had to light the fire and boil the kettle—half-an-hour striking the flints before I could get a light, and breath gone with blowing! It all had to be done by eight o’clock, wet or dry. Cold work, my boy ; with no gloves, and holes in my boots to let the water in! When I got promoted to the Stock Exchange—’

‘ Now, we don’t want to hear all about that, Mr Maitland!’ cried his wife, very tartly, breaking off from Miss Sterne. ‘ Edward is not you! You have worked to make him what he is. Any boy can walk six miles and flounder about at the docks ; but every boy cannot be our Edward!’

She surveyed her son and smiled triumphantly. ‘ I should spoil him if I said what I think of him! Come, give me a kiss, Edward.’ (This invitation he affected not to hear.) ‘ As for you, Mr

Maitland, if you have nothing better to talk about than your early life, you had better go to bed. I could talk of my early life too, but it would sound like a reproach to Edward.'

'As you please, my dear,' replied her husband placidly, rising from his chair. 'Early to bed, early to rise, is the way—'

'Don't be vulgar, Mr Maitland,' interposed his wife, with growing wrath. 'We know all about that. Every infant knows it. If you can only entertain Edward with repeating stupid old proverbs, I say again, —Go to bed!'

'I am quite willing, my love,' with the most immovable good temper. 'I am very sleepy. Edward knows I don't want to reproach him.'

The father stretched out his hand, which was warmly grasped by his son. 'He is welcome to all I can give him—to do just as he likes with it. I never was good at spending.'

'Go to bed, Mr Maitland!' she reiterated. 'You are talking nonsense.'

'This is what you will come to, Edward!' said Mr Maitland, with a proud smile, pointing to his wife, once more absorbed in a desperate struggle with the silk of her

embroidery. ‘But if you choose the right woman—the woman you fancy—it is not such a bad life after all. Your mother and I have pulled along well enough. She likes to snub me now; she didn’t once. You will push on with a wife too, one day—the sooner the better, my boy. Little grandchildren will make your mother happy—give her something to do, when she’s only got me to scold.’

As Mr Maitland raised his round, grey eyes to his son, standing erect, holding the door open for him to pass out, even his drowsy faculties were caught by Edward’s tall, lithe figure, on which his clothes sat so well, the graceful outline of his head and neck, and that grave earnestness which gave such dignity to his young face.

It suddenly struck the good man how strange it was that he should be the father of such a son; struck him with amazement, as he stood staring at him under this new aspect—the inspection proving so satisfactory to his feelings that he broke into a low laugh.

‘The sooner the better, my boy; the sooner the better,’ he repeated, resting his hand for an instant on his son’s arm, and gazing tenderly into the depths of his grey

eyes. 'No fear of your being refused by the girls—no fear! Too good-looking by half. Besides, we can buy you a little furniture.' Liking the joke, he added, 'A chair and a table—eh, Teddy? But listen to your old father; choose your wife for yourself. Never let mortal come between you and the woman you love! That's all! Money is money—all very well in its own place—and I am not the man to gainsay it. And a high station in life for the sweetheart of such a handsome young fellow as you, if she comes in your way, but not otherwise! Choose her, when you decide, for yourself, Teddy, and let all the rest go to blazes. Choice is everything—eh, Nellie?'—to Mrs Maitland in the distance. 'Where should I have been without her?' pointing to the divan. 'Yet her father made a deuce of a row, I remember.'

Edward's eye melted before the honest love of his father's glance—a love to which he knew he could always appeal. But, to do so, would offend and hurt his mother beyond recall. As long as he could remember, the management of everything at home had passed from his father's into his mother's hands. There was a tacit but

absolute understanding about this. To ignore the unspoken law would be mean.

Yes, to choose for himself was all he asked ; and he had chosen !

‘Go to bed, Mr Maitland, go to bed !’ cried his wife, catching the drift of the conversation. ‘You are doing a great deal of harm ! You are preaching rebellion ! Edward is not free ; he is responsible to us !’

‘Hear her ! hear her !’ murmured Mr Maitland, with a jerk of his head and shoulder towards the divan. ‘How she puts things. She would convince a stone. She is a wonderful woman—has been the making of me, Ted ! If that old German Jew, Winter, had such a wife, he would never have gone to the bad. Mrs Winter ! Puff ! Mrs Winter is a jackass ! Believe me, the woman makes the man.’

Still talking, Mr Maitland left the room, just as his wife, more and more exasperated by the turn the conversation was taking, especially at the production of a second proverb, was rising from her seat to insist on his departure.

Edward followed his father into the hall, resolved to overhear no more conversation between his mother and Miss Sterne. As Mr Maitland disappeared upstairs, he opened the front door and went out.



CHAPTER XIII.



HE fog had lifted. The moon shone down serenely from a pale hemisphere, illuminated by its silvery light. Low in the horizon, where the heavens were darker, a few stars twinkled faintly over the naked tree tops.

The river gently lapping against the reedy sedges, doubled the subdued glories of the moon.

The night breeze sighed soothingly among the bare branches of the trees, on which each drop of moisture glistened like a diamond.

The air was fresh, caressing all it met, in little whirls and eddies, like the return of summer.

No sound but a subdued murmur from

the water; even the night birds were hushed. All nature slept, lulled by the beautiful spell of the moonlight; above, below, around reigned peace and heavenly silence.

Edward walked rapidly up and down a broad terrace, which stretched its ample length beside the river, the little wavelets crested with a silvery fringe, rippling monotonously at his feet, the reeds along the turf bank bending before him, as the night breeze passed, the oziers and the withys whispering in a language of their own.

‘Not to marry without her consent! Would to God I had never bound myself!’ he was saying to himself. ‘If I could only have known Sophia’s mind, I would not have yielded; but surely my mother will be reasonable, she cannot expect me to keep such a promise literally.’

But while he told himself this, he dreaded all the while that she *would* expect him to do so, especially after what he had overheard between her and Miss Sterne.

Then as he recalled her injurious words, his whole soul rose up in indignation against her. For the first time in his life he found himself scrutinising her character,

and recalling with pain her many peculiarities, and a terrible doubt as to whether he could trust her came over him.

Never had he felt towards his mother as he felt now—never so keenly appreciated her utter want of delicacy and refinement.

That she should so speak of Sophia after the promise she had wrung from him—a promise which she had no right to demand. That she should allow Miss Sterne (here a twinge of absolute rage contracted his features) to desecrate Sophia's name, shook the very foundations of his confidence.

‘If I only felt sure that she cared for me,’—this thought rose mechanically again and again as he strode up and down the path. ‘If I only knew how to act. My mother must yield—she cannot expect me to sacrifice my life to her foolish ostentation. I am utterly adrift. I have seen Sophia but once.’

Seen her but once! How all the world had changed since then. Old Twickenham seemed all aglow since her arrival. Surely, when they parted at the green door, and he had promised to be her friend, she understood something of his feelings?

‘Oh, beautiful eyes!’ he cried, forgetting

all but his own thoughts, 'how they rested on me. What a look! Surely her fingers returned my pressure—just a little. She told me she was unhappy; she said, "Come and see me," and I, fool that I was, parted from her abruptly. Talked of friendship with a goddess standing before me! Ah, how near she is!'

He suddenly paused in his agitated walk and gazed up over the tree tops. Behind those tall elms, where the rooks cawed all day, rose the red walls of Scatlands.

'Even now, at this very instant, she may be thinking of me.'

At this thought all the blood flamed in his veins in a kind of ecstasy.

'Dare I declare myself so soon.' Again he looked towards Scatlands. At that moment she might be asking herself when he would come.

He would risk his mother's displeasure; he would ask her if she could love him. This thought came over him in fresh throbs of ever-recurring delight. All the world had faded away; there was no living presence but himself and his adored one. The damp night air felt hot upon his brow. Yes, if she loved him she should be his—his own.

But this wild fit of enthusiasm, so alien to his serious nature, cooled somewhat when he reflected, that to irritate his mother by too great precipitancy was to defeat the very object he had in view.

It could only have the effect of irrevocably offending her; after all she was his own dear mater—her faults were but virtues turned the wrong way for him.

Right or wrong, he had made her a promise; he must keep it until she herself set him free.

It was not possible that, with his happiness at stake, she should hold out long. She herself had all but told him, before he went to Oxford, that she had destined him for the Indian heiress.

It was only the ruin and the death of the father that formed the present obstacle. His mother could not seriously believe that he was going to sell himself for money; or that he must not love a girl because her father had shot himself.

At this reflection the calm without seemed to penetrate into his soul. As the moon mounted higher and higher into the purple dome, absorbing every shadow into its dreamy splendour, his hopes rose also in their bright foreshadowing.

How long he paced up and down the river walk he knew not. It seemed very long, for he had been living over, in fancy, all his future life—a life with Sophia.

As he at length turned towards the house, a new spirit animated him. He seemed to tread on air.

In the hall he began a fresh argument with himself as to how far he was justified in trying to gain Sophia's love. In his state of mind the decision was not difficult.

The bright moonlight, flooding floor and ceiling and walls, helped him wonderfully. By day he might not have bridged over difficulties so easily, nor might his reasonings have appeared so conclusive, but under the moonlight so many things are possible!

The circumstances were so peculiar, that he might flatter himself she would overlook all that was unusual in his conduct. If he could only see her alone! Yet, was it wise to risk a visit too soon? He knew he should be watched. She herself might resent it as an intrusion. He would wait, then find an opportunity of saying something to her, to which she might deign to listen.

Not marriage, but an immediate engagement. Could he so soon dare to enter on such a question. What might she think of it?

Remembering the dignity of those big, shadowy eyes resting on him, he trembled.

What he desired to persuade her was, that even an engagement would render her life happier and worthier in that desolate house, under the protection of such a man as Louis Winter.

On this point he would dwell for justification. As he decided all this, no shadow seemed to lie before him. His mother had died out of his mind as the shadows had died out on the lawn, as the moon rose to her zenith.

‘The sooner the better—the sooner the better,’ this phrase ran incessantly in his brain, like the rhyme of a sweet song, as he stood erect before a large bay-window, an illuminated figure bathed in the moonlight.

How could he meet her alone? When decide his fate? It would be difficult at Scatlands with Aunt Amelia always at home. Such a happy encounter, as to-day, in the lane, could hardly be expected a second time.

Oh! if they could meet in the recesses of a great wood, where deep shadows fell across their faces, or in an open plain, where the sun set in solitude upon an empty world. In the silence of the mighty ocean, with nothing over them but the clear sky!—If there could be nothing said! Only to kiss her lips and draw her to him!

Suddenly Edward remembered it must be very late.

He moved from the window, and crossing the hall opened the door of the saloon. He had left some papers he wanted on the table.

At the further end of the room, under a deeply-shaded lamp, sat Miss Sterne. She started up as he entered, and tried to escape by a side door. So noiseless were her movements, so light her step, it was evident she imagined he had not observed her.

Maitland arrested her with a motion of his hand. As he did so, the whole expression of his young face changed into a look of aversion.

‘Miss Sterne, I beg you will remain. I wish to speak to you.’

As his voice came to her, she stood rooted to the spot. Her head bent down, her breath coming with pain. So thin, so slight she looked, so evanescent her pallid cheeks, so sunk into premature hollows, she seemed almost transparent. Yet her large light eyes still retained something of their youthful pathos, her flaxen hair still its beauty, the comb which held it altogether insufficient for its weight, letting it escape in tresses and ringlets over her thin shoulders.

‘You are not keeping to the terms of our agreement. I must remind you of the consequences.’

‘Oh, Mr Maitland—Edward! Have mercy!’ These words were uttered so low that they reached his ear like a whisper.

‘It is you who have no mercy. How dare you speak of an innocent girl as you did to-night of Miss Escott? What do you know of her that you malign her? You, of all others, to let her pure name pass your lips!’

In his indignation Edward had approached a step or two nearer to the place where Miss Sterne stood, in the deep shadow of a curtained doorway.

Before she replied, she put out her hand beseechingly. 'Your mother!' she gasped, 'your mother! I have to tell her everything. If I did not amuse her, she would send me away. Remember, I have no home but this. I dare not oppose her!'

'Oppose her!' You fan the flame by your miserable scandal. Words fell from you just now. I heard them. You intended, yes, wickedly, maliciously intended to injure her. Why did you tell my mother you had seen me with Miss Escott in the lane? You were watching me, you know you were watching me!'

Edward's eyes riveted themselves upon her slight figure as he stood in the centre of the room. His commanding form doubled in the mirrors.

Miss Sterne covered her face with her hands—the delicate blue veins swelling under the tight pressure.

'Why could you not have been silent?' he continued in the same hard tone. 'You might have guessed that I wished to reach the house unobserved. What miserable jealousy prompted you to betray me? I warn you that if you interfere in any way, or utter a single word about Miss Escott to my mother, I shall tell her

the truth. I ought never to have concealed it !’

‘Edward ! Maitland ! You could not—you would not be so cruel. What, oh what have I done but love you,’ burst from Miss Sterne, withdrawing her hands from under the curtain of her flaxen ringlets, and looking at him imploring. ‘Why may I not love you as well as this stranger ? From the first night we met—ah ! you remember. You did not hate me then ?’ and she shot a wild glance at Edward—‘the valse—the bouquet—those sweet, sweet words. Then you cared for me.’

‘Never,’ broke from Edward, determinedly. ‘As the sister of my friend I only offered you the ordinary attentions of society. You misunderstood them, and now—’

‘And now,’ she repeated, catching up his words, her white face worked up to a kind of frenzy. ‘What can you say against me ? What proof can you bring to condemn me ? No one saw it done—the child died in my arms. It was but suspicion. Even that dreadful magistrate at the inquest, when he heard me plead, defended me ; and—and—’ again the thin hands went up, but this time knotted by

the grief and fury within her. 'Had it been otherwise, had I been guilty, it is not for you to accuse me, my worship, for you should have excused even a crime.'

A quick start and a movement of repulsion on Edward's part recalled her to herself.

'But no crime was committed. I swear it by the living God! by the dreadful love I bear you,' and a frantic burst of tears shook her slight frame as the aspen shakes before the tempest. 'Yes, I *am* jealous,' she continued quickly; her voice rising like shrill music in the silence of the room, 'jealous of every woman who approaches you. It is the price I pay for the luxury of your presence. You cannot prevent it. It is my woman's right. I have done nothing to forfeit it.'

'And do you think that I should have allowed you to cross this threshold if I had believed you guilty?' broke from Maitland, indignant at the tone she was taking. 'Do you think I should have allowed my mother to shelter a murderess? No; whatever had been your life, it was my belief in your innocence of that charge which made me pity you, flung alone

on the world after such an accusation. Without that, not all your dear brother's entreaties on his death-bed would have induced me to introduce you to my mother. But this has nothing to do with what followed. A thousand times your unwomanly importunities have all but driven me to the necessity of having you dismissed. You choose to construe my compassion into—'

Turning from her with ill-concealed contempt, Edward could not bring himself to finish the sentence.

'Then came that fever. You nursed me. I did not know it. I was delirious. Had I been in my senses, I would not have allowed it.'

'Don't, don't, Maitland!' broke in Miss Sterne. Her diminutive figure seemed to rise and expand as she advanced towards the hearth, where Edward was standing. 'You may threaten me too much. You may make my life unbearable, all for the sake of this Indian girl. You know it—you know it!' she cried, with a strange break in her voice, suddenly falling back and clinging to a chair to save herself from falling.'

'If, to please your new love, you dis-

grace me by telling Mrs Maitland the pretended crime of which I was accused, I will go down and drown myself in the river. You shall be falsely accused, just as I was. I swear it! Ah! you are in my power now!’ she exclaimed exultingly, in answer to the quick start Edward gave. ‘You cannot prevent that.’

Quivering, she clung to the chair, her half-closed eyes revealing strange lights of mingled love and hate. ‘How can a creature so beautiful be so cruel?’

‘If you are wicked enough to drown yourself that I may be accused of your death, do it,’ replied Edward; ‘at least you have forewarned me.’

‘No, Edward, no,’ flinging herself forward, ‘I could not harm you. You are all the world to me. It is the thought of Miss Escott which maddens me.’

‘But that is what you said, Alicia Sterne. By heaven! it is an awful threat. It makes my skin creep. If,’ here he blushed scarlet—‘if I had given you the smallest reason to address such language to me! Can you say I ever did? Your past life forbade it. I was shocked at your exposing yourself to the fever for my sake, but I never knew it. How could

I imagine that my mother would break down, and that you would take her place ?’

She shook her head despairingly. ‘You are an angel! All I ask is to be near you.’

‘And you are here. Have I betrayed you?’ answered he, with that cold reserve so striking in one so young. ‘But, remember, there were conditions.’

‘Conditions! Yes. I am to sit by and see you love another? Such another as I. Disgraced — dependant — a beggar. I watched you in the lane. I saw her eyes. She was dallying with you.’

‘Silence!’ shouted Edward, losing all self-control, and striding forward. Mid-way he stopped, towering over her like some young god of vengeance.

‘Have pity, have pity!’ was all she could say, crouching before him. ‘Is it such a sin to love you?’

‘Yes,’ replied Edward, ‘to me it seems a sin.’

‘Hear him, hear him!’ cried the unhappy woman; ‘and he thinks I can bear this! Am I not flesh and blood like her? Will she love you as I do? Never! She is too selfish to know what love means. I cannot help it—I cannot help it,’ she

wailed, sinking upon a seat, as she caught the scrutiny of Maitland's cold glance. 'You are breaking my heart.'

For a moment there was silence; then she stretched out a child-like hand, so small and fragile in its helplessness; Edward must have been more than man to resist it. Of all the appeals she had made to him, this little hand alone moved him. For an instant he touched it, then dropped it.

'Alicia, it is not for me to accuse you. I leave you to your own conscience. You are the sister of my dearest friend. However much I disapprove your former life, God forbid that I should willingly make your present position worse than it is. It was to put that life from you—to bury it—I brought you here. But if you wish to remain, you must satisfy me that you will never mention Miss Escott to my mother.'

'Yes, that you may love her and repulse me;' the words came hissing out of a tangle of yellow hair. 'You have spoken to me cruelly—barbarously, Edward Maitland. You are as cold as that marble,' and she pointed to the rich carvings of the mantelpiece behind him.

'But mark my words,' here she raised

her head, and cast upon him a look so full of malice, it turned him cold. 'You will never marry that girl. I will prevent it.' She gave a triumphant smile.

Now it was Edward's turn to cower before this creature, so fiendish in her love. Now it was that he came to understand what manner of woman was before him.

How could he control her? In his present overwrought mood, her words sounded prophetic. In the wild phases of her passion she had struck a cord that horrified him. She would revenge herself, not on him, but on Sophia.

At this moment but one feeling possessed him, to fly as from some incarnate spirit of evil, palpably invoked before him.

Catching up a pile of papers that lay upon a table, without another word he left her.

As his departing footsteps echoed in the hall, a sudden thought seemed to strike her. Wiping away every vestige of tears, and carefully replacing the comb in the luxuriant folds of her long hair, she took up a silver taper, lighted it, and moved towards one of the large mirrors which almost lined the room, then casting a long earnest look at her own face, she murmured sorrowfully,—

‘Not like her—not like her. No longer young—nothing to charm him! Oh, that the years would roll back, and make me what I was! But for a month, a day, an hour! That he might feel something of the fierce fire that consumes me, and take me to him as but his slave.’

Then as the flame of the taper fell upon her blue eyes, she turned them where he had been standing before the hearth, and with a passionate gesture stooped, and kissed the spot where his feet had rested.

‘Let him turn me out; let him disgrace me. I have said it. He shall never marry Sophia Escott.’





CHAPTER XIV.

CLOSE to the Bank of England, turning off sharp to the left, is a long, irregular lane, hardly to be called a street, bordered by mean houses.

Summer or winter the sun never shines there. A ray of light darting, at times, like an arrow through a break in the monotonous row of house-roofs, is all that ever appears, and that only when the sun sets towards the north in long summer days.

It is a place just out of the racket and movement of the city, of utter solitude and silence. Nothing but the thunder of the outer traffic is audible.

No omnibus penetrates there, and the cabs and carts, coming singly, do not boom and echo there as in the broader streets.

The pavement on either side is so narrow, that foot-passengers cannot linger on the way ; but pass rapidly, shouldered by those who come and go.

There are many small musty shops of old iron, and vegetables, and meat ; the latter most uninviting to the eye and nostrils.

What are not shops are offices—some with a plate and a name—some without. To bear no name is a conceit of greatness, much affected by the wealthier firms that inhabit this melancholy quarter.

On many plates the dust and blacks have settled, so that the letters are practically illegible.

The office-doors all open on a swing ; from ten to four they flap incessantly. At four there is a steady exodus east and west.

When night comes, no one is left there, but the guardians of the offices, and the dingy individuals who dispense the unsavoury meat and stale cabbages.

This is their active moment—if the meat be not sold during the day, it will stink before morning.

A crowd of men, women and girls, more wretched and degraded than the sellers, pour in and carry off portions in brown paper, or hanging on a skewer.

Who buys the old iron does not appear. One might stand a whole day, and watch in vain for anyone who came or went into these dark shops. Yet somebody opens them in the morning, and a shutter is put up at night, and a gas jet flares in the air over the heaps of rusty chains and locks and hooks, and odds and ends of grates and boilers, and a cat sits behind, licking its face, and pensively contemplating the passing world with blinking eyes.

But, beyond that, the houses might have been empty, ready for the ghosts.

More than half-way down the lane, and nearer the other end—which debouches into another great throughfare near the post-office, where another noisy stream of traffic comes thundering down like a perpetual bombardment—a small church surrounded by iron railings pushes forward on the pavement.

Nothing to strike the eye in this church of red brick, faced with stone, and carrying a square tower—only that, just over it, out of the tops of the houses, rises majestically the huge dome of St Paul's.

Seeing this, one thinks involuntarily—
'Why should a church be there at all, just within its shadow?'

There is a quiet, tidy court round it, paved in stone, and a few scrubby plane-trees, with black branches, to which some shrivelled leaves still cling, spread themselves over the iron rails into the street.

There is no present graveyard, but all around neat tomb-stones, with forgotten inscriptions, and on one side a footway passing by the church porch, and leading off into further deserts of houses beyond, in the direction of the city.

Taken in conjunction with the depressing aspect of the lane, the dreary houses, the musty shops, and the grave, serious faces that meet each other on the pavement, that church forms a contrast with the prosy dulness of the lane.

If, in passing, I, by accident, miss the sight of that church, I feel aggrieved, and realise more forcibly the utter misery and squalor of the street.

In early summer, the plane trees are bright and green, glittering in the slant of sunshine. Later on they tone down to dusky yellow, and tremble on the branch, like young lives passing away. In winter the sparrows hop about on the bare branches in a bold, cheery way, and twitter to each other in little homely concerts, not

wanting a certain charm ; and when the snow hangs there it glitters the whole place into a glory.

An old orange-woman has planted her stall just beneath the iron gates, which open to the church, and sits there, a smile upon her battered old face, keenly scrutinising each passer-by in respect of purchases.

If her smile meets a reassuring glance, she thrusts an orange in your face. If not, she watches you, smiling still, and muttering to herself,—

‘ Thank you, good gentleman, thank you. Another day, thank you kindly.’

It is twelve o’clock, and very cold. It froze hard in the night, only the southern side of the lane has thawed a little, and here and there the pavement is muddy, and the stones slushy ; otherwise, all is ice-bound.

An incipient fog hangs in the air waiting, further on in the day, to descend in force and wrap everything in its dusky folds.

It is twelve o’clock, but few passers-by have appeared at all, and none on the side of the street where the church stands.

The smile on the orange-woman’s face is almost a grin, it is so rueful. She has tilted her rusty black bonnet over her nose,

and wrapped a ragged tartan shawl tightly round her. Her feet are hidden in some wisps of hay a benevolent cabman bestowed on her, as she took her seat in the morning on the broken basket, which is her throne.

Before her, a patch of bright colour in the surrounding gloom, lie her oranges, piled up artistically upon a paper, which she has carefully picked out of a recent dust-heap, and having been well polished in her shawl, shine preternaturally.

Not one reassuring smile has met her eye that day. She has said, 'Thank you, good gentleman, another day,' so often, that she repeats it softly to herself, like a charm, dozing a little between whiles, it is so cold.

Now, passing along the passage at her back, towards the iron gates that lead into the street, there is the sound of a rapid foot-fall, and a short, thick-set man, with short legs and a head and shoulders quite out of proportion to his body, appears.

He is well wrapped up in a great-coat of a foreign cut, faced with fur, and a voluminous worsted comforter is twisted so many times round his throat, that nothing is visible of his face but a prominent nose, now very purple, over which a high-crowned, narrow-brimmed hat is balanced on a shock

of hair. Both hands in his pockets, as he reaches the orange-woman, who rouses herself from a doze, and smiles a haggard smile.

‘Thank you, good gentleman,’ is on her lips, when something in the pucker of the purple nose arrests her. A pair of keen little dark eyes disclose themselves from under the narrow brim of the hat—eyes which smile distinctly at her.

The orange-woman plunges her hand among the bright balls of well-rubbed fruit, and bringing out two more shining than the rest, offers them with a beseeching look.

‘It is very cold, good gentleman.’

She says no more. Experience has taught her that pressing brings no customers.

‘Tamed cold!’ promptly responds the voice of Mr Winter. ‘So, so, my dear,’ pushing back the oranges with his elbow; ‘vat can I do vid he? I do not want he. He make my stomick aches.’

‘You’d ache, mister, if you sat here all day as I do,’ answered the woman gruffly.

She felt herself aggrieved. This one had proved like the others, but he did smile, and now he will not buy.

‘Dat I should!’ responded Mr Winter, frankly; ‘rather zee nor me, my gute frau. My gute frau, I do not want ze fruit, but

here is von leetle penny, two leetle pennies, by dad! Vy! here is three leetle pennies, and all for zee! ha! ha! all for zee! Dat is vot I call the luck. No von vill geeve me von single penny—no von.'

Mr Winter laughed, took out of his pocket a hand warmly enclosed in a worsted glove, knit by Aunt Amelia, and placed the pennies in the woman's outstretched palm one by one, with a grin upon his red face as broad as her own.

'Dere, gute frau,' he said triumphantly, dropping the last penny into her hand, which closes on it like a spring. 'Never say *die*. Now give me a trink health.'

'A good gentleman, you be, master,' is her reply, in the same gruff voice as before, as she rams the pennies into the depths of a side pocket that appears to reach to her knees. Then, bringing herself up again with a jolt,—'You warm a body, you do!'

'Gut morgen, madame,' says Mr Winter, making a ceremonious bow, and feebly making believe to raise his hat to the orange-woman, who stands erect, her arms hanging straight down, shaking with laughter.

'Good day, gentleman. I hope you'll often pass this way.'

But Mr Winter is gone. With his large

feet and short legs he shuffles quickly over the pavement.

Now he has crossed the road, turns sharply to the right, passes about a dozen houses, then, without taking his hands from his pockets, butts against a swing door in a very grimy house, and enters.

Within is another door, to open which Mr Winter takes his hands from his pockets. 'So—so,' he mutters approvingly, as he snuffs up the warm air that comes circling round him from within. 'Dat ees goot.'

He enters a large low room, a kind of gallery, lighted at intervals by skylights. From the outside of the house no one would have guessed the size of the premises, built over what had once been a garden at the back.

An open gangway leads down the middle of the floor, straight from the outer doors, to another at the far end, covered with green baize and studded with brass nails.

On either side of the gangway are high desks, each furnished with a rude metal inkstand, a sheet of blotting-paper, and an almanack.

In the centre of the office, on either hand, is an open space, warmed by two large stoves.

The high desks, placed in a semicircle near the fire, are filled with clerks of various ages, writing, or appearing to write. Some near the door are vacant. That is the coldest part of the room, and is avoided.

At the upper end, near the baize door, is a kind of wooden pulpit, at which sits an immovable figure, with a blank face and searching eyes, writing too, but also watching the progress of the various clerks, whom it is his business to overlook.

Under the pulpit is a counter, covered with much-stained leather, and a couple of cane-bottomed chairs for the accommodation of such persons as have business with the firm, and are not admitted to the sanctum within.

Coming from the frost outside, the heat is oppressive. Mr Winter evidently finds it so.

‘Poof! poof!’ he exclaims, as he passes down the office, taking off, first, his hat, then his gloves, then his fur cloak, and finally his worsted scarf. ‘Poof!’

By the time he reaches the pulpit, he has one by one stripped himself of all his wraps, and appears in his house attire.

The clerks stare at his grotesque figure in silence; only from one or two of the

younger ones, unaccustomed to his appearance, a suppressed titter escapes.

Mr Winter is too much preoccupied with his clothes and the heat to observe this ; but, had he observed it, he would probably have joined in the laugh.

Passing by the pulpit, he is entering the baize door, when a voice out of the ceiling stops him.

‘ Beg pardon, Mr Winter, have you an appointment ? ’

‘ Vat you mean, you rascal ? ’ cries Mr Winter angrily, retaining the door-handle in his hand, and looking up at the stolid face of the clerk in the pulpit. ‘ Do zee not know mees ? ’

‘ Yes, Mr Winter, I have the pleasure ; but Mr Bauer, sir, has given strict orders not to be disturbed. The American mail goes out to-day, sir. ’

‘ Zee be tamned, sir, ’ replies Mr Winter curtly, his whole face turning as purple as his nose, which suddenly grows defiantly prominent. ‘ I asks no leef to go to mine own neffe. In zee teeth of all de clerks in London, I go, I am gone. ’





CHAPTER XV.

AT this point Louis Winter, refusing any further parley, bangs the baize door open with the same impetus with which he entered the office, amid peals of laughter from the various clerks, which no efforts of the gentleman in the ceiling can suppress.

Indeed Mr Johnstone, who is the head clerk, is fain to duck down into the depths of his pulpit to conceal his feelings. It is with a shaky voice that, when he emerges to light again, he calls out, 'Order, gentlemen! Order, if you *please*, gentlemen.'

Within the baize door is a passage, corresponding to the outer office, with doors on either side. Half-way up, a staircase leads to the first floor. Up this staircase

Mr Winter charges headlong, his fur coat and comforter streaming behind him like a train.

A door to the right on the top landing, announced as 'Private' in large letters, stands partly open. Mr Winter dashes in.

A grey-headed clerk, sitting at a table covered with papers and ledgers, starts up amazed.

Before he can interpose, Mr Winter has opened a second door, so precipitately that the loud sound of his heels on the boards inside suggests that he has fallen.

The door closes in the face of the grave clerk, who is apparently preparing to expostulate.

'Poof! poof!' gasps Mr Winter, drawing up his shoulders to his ears, as if wrestling with his under garments, 'I am so hot, John Bauer—so hot.'

He flings down his wraps upon a leather chair standing against the wall, opens his coat, pulls down his waistcoat, and loosens his neckcloth.

'Ze teufel downstairs in ze pulpeets, sitting up like Herods in de judgment seats, would not let me pass. Ough, Johann, I am so hot! so hot!' And

Mr Winter looks inquiringly upon his nephew, as if he could relieve him.

There is no response. The scratch of John's pen is heard over the paper; his head is bent down.

'A busy day, Uncle Louis; almost post time—hum-hm—*mit dem grösstem Vergnügen*, hum-hm.' (The clerks know this to their cost, and Mr Johnstone knows it.) 'You must not stay long. *Wir werden uns verbinden auf das ausgelegte.*' His voice drops into his paper.

To look at, John Bauer is like a big schoolboy, who has grown too fat. He has neither beard nor whiskers; is tall, thin, and high-shouldered. He stoops very much, and there is a peculiar looseness about his clothes, as if they had been stitched together without lining.

A sunny, fair-haired man, even in that chill winter morning, with a pervading gleam like southern hedges in spring time. A long, thoughtful nose, which matches with a thoughtful brow; long, straight hair, pushed back anywhere; blue eyes; a thin-lipped mouth; and an undecided chin.

No one, to look into his pleasant face, would have taken him for the bold speculator and successful merchant, who, since

he came of age (he is now thirty-five, and had succeeded, by the death of his uncle—the brother-in-law of Mr Winter—to the old-established and most respectable firm of Bauer & Bauer, drysalters, oilmen, and Russian merchants), had, by his masterly management, almost doubled their already large receipts, in the course of a few years.

Both John Bauer's parents were German, from Frankfort, and he speaks with a German accent; but, having lost father and mother when a child, and been educated in England under his uncle's care, he affects Anglomania to such an extent, that he will never converse in German, unless absolutely obliged.

Nature has not done the excellent John justice. He feels it. Out of his office, he is the shyest and most diffident of men.

'What do you want, Uncle Louis?' he asks at last, holding his pen suspended in his fingers, and pushing back the long, lank hair which had fallen over his brow: 'I have told you I am very busy.'

'Ha, ha!' exclaims Mr Winter disdainfully. 'Busy? Es est di pore shouls like me is busy; not zee, Johann, mein sohn, not zee.'

Here Mr Winter takes off his spectacles, put on to look at his nephew, rubs the glasses carefully on his coat, replacing them, then, glancing benevolently at him, dives into the recesses of his pocket, draws out the usual red handkerchief, and blows his nose with the resonance of a trumpet.

‘Now listen to vot I says, Johann! Dat fellow Gompertz ze gif me for a pardner, he es von tamned rogues.’

Here Mr Winter raises his arm, then lets his fist fall heavily on the table.

‘Uncle Louis! Gompertz is no rogue; he is an honest man.’

‘I zay it; I zay he von rogues,’ roars Mr Winter, now on his feet, and leaning over the table on both his hands, a pair of angry eyes lowering behind his spectacles, and his huge nose directed like a catapult full in his nephew’s face. ‘Gompertz lock up my ledgers, de prides, de glorys of my life. All my grand speculazion, in de ledgers. De noble tings I have done. He keep de key. I ask Gompertz vonce,—twice,—drice. I say, “Gip me die key.” Gompertz, he zay,—“No, *nimmer mehr*!” I stamps; I rage; I zeize em by de throat.’

Here Uncle Louis appears about to repeat the same pantomime on John Bauer, but he quickly pushed back his chair.

‘Now I asks by vat right dat tamned Gompertz say no? By vat right? De rascals! I know vy he have lock hims up for ees-self, dat Gompertz, de long-legged monkey. Gompertz know all vid my ledger. Ee take de head off de houses, and lead me by de nose like a schild. Vid my ledgers die grosse *Compagnie* vas governed. Tausend teufels! I miss all by der tamned Gompertz. Die fall in die French Funds! Aha! Deed I not knows de fall of Charles Dix? Deed I not tell der fool Gompertz de king go away in die nacht? Ee shake von tamned heads, der Gompertz. He zay noting! Nobody zay noting. De Polignac ministry go crack! Die coup is gone, and Gompertz stand with open mouth. Ven he see me rage, he zay, “Komm, my guter Winter, let us go and play di simfonia in Medea. Bah! die simfonia! Vat ees simfonias to me? and Gompertz tamned double bass? I vant my ledgers, Johann; I gomm to ask my books.’

John Bauer held down his head, and smiled secretly to the letter spread out

before him. He dared not face his uncle's keen eyes. It was he, good, excellent fellow, who had started Mr Winter again on his return from that furtive expedition abroad, commenced from the back door at Scatlands, opening into the Twickenham meadows, when he escaped so deftly from the sheriff's-officer and his creditors.

John Bauer, with unknown difficulty, had subsequently found him a partner—for he still dabbled a little in business—an immovable German, in sympathy with him as being fond of classical music, and a fair performer on the double bass, otherwise insensible alike to persuasive eloquence or even threats; Gompertz joining with Louis Winter only on the express condition that no cheque not countersigned by himself should be drawn.

But before any overtures were made to the proposed partner, Uncle Louis's delusive ledger was impounded. With that ledger in his possession, nothing could convince him that his bills were unpaid.

'Uncle Louis,' replies John at last, 'I cannot interfere. It was difficult enough to find a partner for you. I can do nothing. Pray go away!'

'Do notings! Do notings! Johann!

Mein Gott !' and Mr Winter, grown furious again, throws up his arms wildly in the air. ' My sister's son do notings !'

John Bauer draws some strokes on the blotting-paper before him, then casts an imploring glance, first at the door, then at the excited face and the working purple nose before him.

' *Indeed* I can do nothing, Uncle Louis. You have no money to speculate with. Gompertz is a steady, practical man. Do not oppose him, or he will throw up the concern. Where will you be then ?'

Mr Winter wrings his hands, a look of the most poignant grief flits across his face.

' It ees zo ; even zo,' he said, in a muffled voice, hanging down his head. ' Ven die great coup gomes—it ees ever zo—it vill break my hearts. Not von little chance ! Not von ! Vid de desert of Dresda China zo schön, all de French Kings—in old Dresda. Den dat blessed Families von Raphael,—a copy, *Johann*, a copy, but a copy worth much.'

Here, extending his short arms to their utmost length, he suddenly drops them, and raps himself sharply on the chest.

' A copie, but I sells ee as an originale. Dat French dealer buys all ! Ach himmel !

it ees too baad, too baad.' The tears are in his eyes; the red handkerchief at his nose.

John Bauer is unmoved. He winced a little, and frowned at his uncle's avowal of cheating about the Raphael; but he lets it pass.

'I am very sorry, uncle, I cannot interfere! Do go! Only look what a lot of letters I have to answer before five o'clock,' and he points to a pile of papers before him.

All the spirit had gone from Mr Winter's features, the fire from his eye. The little arts he practised so successfully at home did not avail him here.

What John Bauer said, John Bauer stuck to, and on John Bauer he was utterly dependent!

Spite of his eccentricities, Uncle Louis was no fool! He knew perfectly well that it wanted but little to make Gompertz throw him over altogether, so constant had been their bickerings of late.

With reluctant hands he takes up one by one his furred coat, hat, and comforter, and, as if too much absorbed in the depths of depression to say a word, is leaving the room without even saying good-bye.

John Bauer rose ; he held out his hand with a smile. Mr Winter took it in solemn silence ; he gives no answering smile. Despair is written on every line of his mobile face—unutterable gloom sits in his eye.





CHAPTER XVI.

‘**B**Y the way, Uncle Louis,’ said John Bauer, ‘before you go, tell me about Aunt Amelia; how is she? I must come and see her soon.’

‘Die Amelie? Zee ees well! Zee ees well,’ he answered, in a deep muffled voice, turning towards the door. Ere he had reached it he stopped abruptly. A sudden light struck across his tempest-torn face. His solemn air vanished. In a moment he was wringing John Bauer’s hand violently. ‘Der fools! der fools!’ he cried gaily, tapping his forehead; ‘I forgets. Die Sophie ees gomm; die Sophie.’

John Bauer started.

‘Do you mean Miss Escott? Is she come already?’

‘Zie goud like di tiefs in di nights—Sophie—Beautifuls, beautifuls, Johann, like von angels! And zee play.’ Mr Winter kissed his finger tips and waved them in the air enthusiastically.

John, whose passion was music and a violoncello (indeed the bliss of his musical evenings at Scatlands had been a great link between him and his uncle), forgot the mail and his unfinished letters, and became suddenly deeply interested.

‘Gomm, Johann, gomm soon to de old house, and hear hers.’

‘I should like nothing better,’ was John’s prompt reply.

‘Ze heard di concert’s Stück von Himm-mel? In three parts? Die Sophie play he divine!’

‘No; is it fine?’ asked John, drawing close to his uncle, and fixing his eyes eagerly on him.

‘Not hear di Concert Stück von Himm-mel! Guter Gott! Is zee mad, Johann? For vot do zee live?’

It was now John Bauer’s turn to look profoundly humiliated.

‘Fine? Gottlich! Sophie zee play die piano parts vid me. Den die part von di violoncello ees silent—silent as de graves!’

Not hear di Concert Stück, Ach himmel, Johann, wunderlich !'

At that moment a knock was heard at the door, and Mr Johnstone appears.

'Goldschen & Grossen, sir,' he said, addressing John Bauer, 'have sent the junior partner to confer with you, sir, on that affair of the five hundred thousand pounds loan.'

'Tell him I am out of town, Mr Johnstone. Tell him anything. I cannot see him at this moment,' answered John quickly, his blue eyes gleaming in his head like pale stars.

Mr Johnstone stared ; he turned his eye first on his chief, then on Mr Winter, with amazement.

'An appointment must be made, sir.' He spoke in deprecating accents. (Was Bauer & Bauer gone mad? Mr Johnstone was asking himself).

'He can come again at three—yes at three o'clock this afternoon. Tell the junior partner I am sorry, but that I am particularly engaged at present. I cannot see anyone while my uncle, Mr Winter, is here.'

There was a wicked twinkle in Louis Winter's eyes as he listened, and a subdued

flourish of his red handkerchief as he caught the eye of his enemy Johnstone.

‘Do not let me be interrupted again,’ added John Bauer; ‘I am particularly engaged.’

Mr Johnstone bowed and retired, evidently under protest.

‘Now, Uncle Louis,’ said John eagerly, leaning on the table which divided them, ‘tell me all about the *Conzert Stück*. Can I read the part at sight without putting you and Miss Escott out? or will you send it me here at once to practise?’

The most radiant happiness was spread over Uncle Louis’s rubicund countenance.

‘Zee shall have de part, mein Johann. I will leave it here myself.’

‘I play so badly, Uncle Louis; you are such an artist! and Miss Escott too—a stranger. I am almost ashamed. If it were not for my business, I would run down for the music to-night myself.’

‘Zee do not play zo bads, Johann,’ said Mr Winter, patting his arm with much condescension. ‘No zo bads,—vid more practice zee do better.’

John Bauer received this very doubtful eulogy with the greatest gratitude, his boyish face beaming all over like a ripe apple.

‘I adore Hümmel; he is my favourite master. Tell me, Uncle Louis, does the piano lead?’

‘Zee do. Zee geef die motif in die andante. Ach! it ees schön!’

‘What are the movements?’

‘Die introduzions, andante, scherzo, and finale. Great werke—great werke! Strong in the finale, Johann. Some fine arpeggios!—zee most stunning arpeggios! Noting is more beautifuls. Noting! Except,’ he added, ‘die Sophie; zee, too, is beautifuls!’

‘I will come down when I know the part, and try it, if—if—’ John Bauer’s sallow face turned suddenly very shy, and he blushed all over, like a girl. In his enthusiasm for Hümmel, he had been betrayed into making a promise, which concerned a young lady whom he had never seen—‘if you think she, Miss Escott, would like it.’

‘Mees Escott! Mees Escott! Vot ees to do vid Mees Escott,’ cried Mr Winter impatiently. ‘It ees die musick. It ees die Sophie. Zee cannot play vidout die Sophie.’

Here Mr Winter looked unutterable things, drew John Bauer near to him and

spoke into his ear. 'Zee must look at die Sophie—die Tante vant zee to marry her, Johann.'

'Marry Miss Escott!' cried John Bauer, utterly aghast. 'Marry Miss Escott! Why she would not look at me!'

If the floor had opened before him, John Bauer's face could not have expressed more astonishment.

'So, so,' replied his uncle gravely, nodding his head; 'dat is vot die Tante says. Die Tante says, "Johann can have di music at home vid die Sophie. Johann! Ven die Sophie plays die eyes in die clouds, zee ist die Sanct Ceciliens. Somtimes I forget my flutes to look at zee. Poor shouls! poor shouls! Die heart is broke now; zee ees zo poor!'

John's countenance expressed the deepest attention.

'Zaz not to die Tante I zay so, or dee angels will break my poor old heads. But gomm, my boys, gomm and zee.'

John Bauer was greatly confused. He was so much alarmed at the prospect of marrying Sophia, and at his aunt's plans, that he was on the point of refusing to come at all; but the temptation of seeing this wonderful beauty, and of trying the new

symphony, was too much for him. After a brief struggle he decided to comply.

All this time, Uncle Louis, his eyes twinkling joyfully through his glasses, had been watching him. Now he rubbed his fat, dumpy hands together gleefully, when John Bauer, his fair face growing redder each moment, promised that he would come to Scatlands as soon as he had learned his part.

‘It ees grandiose die musics,’ said Mr Winter, putting on his coat, assisted by him, and wreathing the endless comforter round his neck. Instinct told Uncle Louis it was best to dwell upon the charms of the music, rather than upon the charms of Sophia. ‘Herrlich—’

‘Oh, talk not of it, I implore you,’ burst out poor John, unable any longer to restrain his feelings. ‘Go away, Uncle Louis ; you have said enough for to-day.’ He was pushing his uncle gently towards the door. ‘Go, or I shall run away and be at Scatlands before you.’

‘Tell not die Tante,’ pleaded Uncle Louis, in his deep, throaty voice, the very sound of which, to strangers, carried conviction ; ‘tell her notinks.’

‘You shall come here no more, Uncle

Louis,' said John resolutely, as he shook hands with him; 'you have completely upset me; I have lost a whole hour.'

'Goot, goot,' were Mr Winter's parting words at the door, glowing all over; 'all rights; zee can afford it. Gomm soon, Johann; gomm soon.'

Mr Winter chuckled to himself all down the stairs, and through the office, still rubbing his fat hands together.

He had utterly forgotten his wrongs against Gompertz, and his ledger. Even the inveterate Johnstone was no longer his enemy. He flourished his hat in passing him aloft in his pulpit, and bowed graciously to such clerks as saluted him in his passage down the room.

He was in such spirits that he recklessly dropped half a sovereign into the hand of the porter who opened the door.





CHAPTER XVII.



THE drawing-room at Scatlands was a delightful room, lighted on two sides by four tall, narrow 'Anne' windows, with small squares of glass, and thick wooden partitions.

The old-fashioned furniture, covered with pale yellow damask, though somewhat faded indeed, and frayed in places where it had been much used, was still soft and pretty.

Something, too, had been added in the way of modern articles for daily use, quite out of character with the rest of the room.

On the panelled walls, carefully placed so that the light fell on them at the correct angle, were hung various pictures in rich frames, calling themselves Guido, Domenichino and Caracci, side by side with the

more delicate-toned tints of Wynants and Wouvermans.

A mediæval figure in a Venetian dress by Paolo Veronese, and a doubtful Titian, were decidedly painted over.

Whether these pictures, and others by less famous artists, were really originals, or only skilfully concocted copies (like the Raphael mentioned by Mr Winter in his visit to his nephew), it would be presumptuous to assert, in opposition to such a judge. He declared he never had possessed a copy in his life.

At all events, they furnished the dark walls well, and gave colour and dignity to the room.

All were for sale, having been consigned to Mr Winter by the unquestioning faith of dealers, for his written certificate—a certificate artfully delayed for many months, until they had sufficiently decorated Aunt Amelia's drawing-room, and fully indulged his own artistic taste.

As one set was sold off, another arrived from London to fill the vacant places, so that the dark oak-panelled walls were never bare.

On carved shelves and wooden brackets, continued between the spaces on the walls,

and in the corners, were ranged choice specimens of china—plates, vases, gold-mounted pokals and tazzas.

Exquisite little groups of figures, mostly Dresden and Capo di Monte, and Oriental plates, with a small show of that Urbino ware, to become so precious in our day.

On the various tables and chiffoniers lay enamelled snuff-boxes and bonbonnières—toys in gold filigree, mother-of-pearl boxes, and carved ivory plaques and cabinets.

Miniatures of powdered ladies and velvet-coated gentlemen. Shepherdesses and Corydons—La Vallières and Marie Antoinettes—all amazingly like each other.

A marble statue of John Kemble in Hamlet, with folded arms, a highly curled wig, and a saturnine expression of countenance.

A French clock, on a purple globe, from the Petit Trianon—a collection of medals in a little ormolu cabinet—a Dresden tea-service, with views of the French palaces, on a porcelain plateau—a Turkish dagger—some old embroidery, used as mats and table-covers, and a great deal of old lace of a sickly yellow—of china bowls and Indian boxes.

All these things, in more or less good

condition, like the paintings, were for sale, committed to Mr Winter for his opinion, as a guarantee of their artistic value, and impounded by him at his pleasure.

Books there were none, except some illustrated works piled up between the windows, which had come in the way of business like all the rest.

Now and then, out of this miscellaneous collection, things were missed that certainly had been extracted from Mr Winter's pocket by his wife.

The dealers complained and talked of law. Mr Winter, uttering many loud Achs so's! and Guter himmels! laughed gaily, and so the matter passed off, he giving a better certificate than usual for some anonymous painting, or a modern imitation in porcelain.

In a corner of the room furthest from the door stood a grand piano in a rather battered case. Piles of torn, loose music lay upon it and crowded on chairs and stands, the pages much thumbed and dog-eared by frequent use.

This pianoforte had turned up so persistently in the changing fortunes of the family, that it was suspected Aunt Amelia's friends had something to do with it.

On the piano reposed, upon a cushion, Mr Winter's silver-mounted flute, in a green shagreen case greatly the worse for wear.

Much worse for wear also was the thread-bare carpet, in some places actually in holes ; and several cane-bottomed chairs from which the paint had vanished ; along with various music-stands, more or less dilapidated.

Indeed, the legs of all the chairs being very doubtful, initiated visitors at Scatlands always requested that a seat might be chosen for them by Aunt Amelia.

A heavy sofa—which might have been a bed—encased in a not over-clean case was drawn up near the fire ; the hearth-rug, once a Turkish prayer-carpet, before it in tatters.

The costly objects on the tables were constantly obliterated by a litter of household linen and old stockings, sometimes—oh pudor !—a pair of trousers made their appearance, or a cambric-frilled shirt belonging to Mr Winter, in need of mending.

If Uncle Louis came home early, and saw this, he stormed at Aunt Amelia, and, in his eager way, generally flung the various household articles about the room.

But, with all its discrepancies, the yellow

drawing-room was the secret joy of Aunt Amelia's life—a bit of still life that reminded her of the days of her youth, in the old country house near Uxbridge, where she had passed the only happy years she had ever known, with her mother and sister. If bad news were to come, by post or otherwise, she felt she could bear it better in the yellow drawing-room, full of artistic treasures, than in the horrible, squalid lodgings at Hoxton or Lambeth, where fate, in the person of her husband, had so often consigned her. Only to sit in the yellow drawing-room, in her delicate lace cap and pale ribbons, and inhale the aromatic odour of dried rose-leaves out of some large china bowl ; the solid furniture and the grand piano—hers at least for the present—in tolerable ease and comfort, without too much agitation about weekly bills, and to gaze out of the square panes of the tall, gaunt windows, framed in yellow curtains, was the greatest luxury of Aunt Amelia's life.

Besides some canaries, which twittered and sang all day inside, there was a ledge outside on which the robins pecked at the bread-crumbs which she laid there. Beyond was the peaceful old garden, with its

trim gravel walks, bordered by the mellow-tinted bricks of the red walls, relieved by branches of venerable pear-trees. There was not a tree or a shrub in that garden, not a leaf, hardly a stone, that Aunt Amelia had not exchanged thoughts with, as well as with the little robins, until they had all grown into friends.

The passing clouds, the summer sunshine, the wintry mist, were her friends also ; but distant friends, more vague and changeful, fit only for vague thoughts in idle hours. The trees and walls, paths and birds, were the recipients of her daily confidences, always at hand to listen and console.

Aunt Amelia is seated in a low bee-hive chair, before the large open grate, in which a rather small fire burns on bright steel 'dogs,' reflecting itself gaily on white and blue Dutch tiles, representing Moses and Pharaoh amid the plagues of Egypt.

The morning is grey and colourless, and but faintly lights up the pictures on the walls.

Aunt Amelia wears a bombazine dress, covered with crape, that hangs limp about her ; but she is scrupulously neat, and the soft lace and ribbons of her cap set

off her resigned, fair face, a trifle paler and more anxious-looking since Sophia Escott's arrival. She is ashamed to produce her household work before her magnificent niece, so she has extracted from some stores of better days, divers long strips of coloured knitting. Now the steel needles have fallen on her lap, her hands are folded, the small white fingers, with the neatly-kept nails, crossed tightly together, in the attitude of one who is waiting for something which she expects, yet dreads. Every now and then, at some slight sound, she starts and turns her eyes nervously towards the door; then, with a subdued sigh of relief, she resumes her knitting. She would not like to own how happy she is to be alone.

It is nearly a week since Sophia came. A week!—to Mrs Winter it seems a year. Nothing has gone well since. Everybody has been worried and out of temper. The instinct that had come over her, when she first met her niece, is but too well justified. Sophia has closed her heart against her.

It is quite clear, even to kind, patient Aunt Amelia—so hopeful of good, so slow to blame—that her niece does not like her. That critical moment when Sophia

had hidden from her her meeting with young Maitland, had cast them asunder.

Mrs Winter feels the effect, without understanding the cause. She can never hope to associate Sophia with her genial, outspoken brother. The girl is of another type. She must resemble her Indian mother, in that hard, sullen pride which refuses to adapt itself to anything. All the affection she has to give is bestowed on Uncle Louis. She can always talk to him; they play together every evening, and he never rages at her in muttered German oaths, rounding into rattling R's, as he rages at Aunt Amelia. And, what is worse, he is always scolding her for not being kind enough to her niece.

Poor dear Uncle Louis does not look far. He is little at home, and only sees Sophia at her best; and he has such jovial, happy ways that no one could be ill-tempered with him—not even his creditors. Either he does not understand what is going on, or, in the exuberance of his artistic nature, he would rather blame Aunt Amelia than Sophia.

How many tears she has shed silently at night, over Sophia's unkindness and

Uncle Louis's harshness, no one can ever know. In vain she tries to alter her behaviour, her looks, her words. Every-day she has a new plan, but it changes nothing. Perhaps adversity has hardened Sophia; perhaps her father's indulgence had rendered her callous; perhaps it is her own (Aunt Amelia's) fault. She is nothing but an old bore; no girl could ever care for her.

And yet, how much she longed to gain her niece's love! 'Oh, how can I reach her heart?' she repeats—'oh, how can I comfort her?'

All the little, gentle ways of her sweet motherly nature have been tried in vain. Spite of all she can do, there has risen up an almost hostile atmosphere between them. There were more troubles, too, afloat. Mrs Winter had met Mrs Maitland one day walking in the lane with Miss Sterne (how much Aunt Amelia disliked and mistrusted Miss Sterne, words cannot express; there was something so sinister in her face, hidden by the long ringlets), and Mrs Maitland had taken Aunt Amelia aside, and plainly told her that, after what had happened respecting her niece, she could not possibly visit her as before, at least while

her son Edward was at home. Miss Escott, she heard, was very attractive to men.

She was so sorry, but she must, from the first, let it be understood that any idea of a matrimonial connection between the two families was impossible ; therefore it would be better, for the present, to suspend their usual intercourse.

‘ People could not be too explicit and too cautious in such a serious matter as marriage,’ Mrs Maitland said, bridling with conscious superiority, ‘ particularly between such near neighbours.’

‘ Not that my feelings to you, my dear friend,’ added Mrs Maitland, with a dash of real kindness in her eyes, turned on the downcast figure of Mrs Winter, ‘ will ever alter. No, never. We shall fall into our old places again by-and-by, but just for the present, I think it best to make a change. Mr Maitland thinks so too, and you know, Mrs Winter,’ she continued, determined to clinch the nail, ‘ Mr Maitland says little, but about Edward’s prospects he is more imperative than I am.’

This idea of her husband struck Mrs Maitland as so excellent, she proceeded to improve on it.

‘ With Mr Maitland’s strong feelings,

and the kind of marriage he wishes Edward to make (not a young man of the world, you know, my dear, and unable to bow or scrape) it would not do at all. They tell me she is very handsome,—not my style of beauty, I imagine’—here Mrs Maitland bridled again, throwing back her head, ornamented with a bonnet on which reposed a bird of paradise in full relief—‘too bold and striking for my taste.’

All this time Aunt Amelia’s heart beat so violently, she had the greatest difficulty in supporting herself opposite her tormentor; to speak with that thumping at her side, and suffocation in her throat, was impossible.

Mrs Maitland interpreting her silence into a meek acquiescence went on.

‘Of course, Edward must do as he pleases about calling. He is too old now for me to dictate what visits he should make.’

Mrs Maitland said this simply as a flourish, in the belief that after her conversation with him, and Edward’s promise, there was small chance of his going near Scotlands, still, for fear of accidents, she added,—

‘If Edward does call, do let me entreat

you, dear Mrs Winter, not to encourage his visits. Make him understand you do not wish to see him. Give Miss Escott a hint too, as to its being his father's wish (mind, his *father's*, so much more important than mine) that there should be no intercourse between them.'

At last Aunt Amelia found voice to answer. With her hand pressed to her side, and a hectic flush on her face, she broke her long silence.

'I think, Mrs Maitland, you might have spared me so detailed a statement—'

'Not at all, not at all,' broke in that lady. 'Better be plain and above-board, specially when a father's most sacred feelings are concerned—'

'A hint would have sufficed, I assure you,' said Mrs Winter, moving on. Even she was roused to resentment. 'I can answer for my niece; you quite mistake her, let me tell you.'

'Ah! that is the question,' said Mrs Maitland hastily, with just the slightest glance at the veiled figure of her companion, immovable behind her, 'the whole question—'

'I am not going to undertake Sophia's defence,' continued Aunt Amelia, with

quiet dignity (that dreadful heart of hers, which always beat at the wrong moment, was a little quieter) 'she needs none. Your opinion of her is valueless. You do not know her; but, believe me, neither you nor Mr Maitland need fear any designs upon your son. With my knowledge, he shall never put his foot within our doors again. We may be unfortunate, Mrs Maitland,' added Aunt Amelia, with just a touch of bitterness, 'and the arrival of my niece has added to our misfortunes, but we have not lost the feeling of our birth. We are incapable of connivance.'

The perfect frankness with which Mrs Maitland dealt with every subject, her own affairs included (as has been said), the absolute absence of all social delicacy, left her quite at a loss before Mrs Winter's grave reproof.

She stared round-eyed and amazed at her neighbour, who was now turning away without even the form of wishing her good-bye.

'What do you mean?' she cried, following her and seizing her hand with the most perfect good-humour.

'You would not have had me silent on

such a subject surely, when the prospects of my only son are concerned ? ’

‘ I would have you, Mrs Maitland,’ retorted Mrs Winter, stopping, much against her will, ‘ consider other persons’ feelings a little.’

‘ But what have your feelings to do with it, my dear friend ? I don’t blame you about your niece : you have nothing to do with her. I pity you extremely. Such a temper, I hear ! Such, pride, such vanity ! and then the family malady ! ’

Here Aunt Amelia opened her mouth to ask to what family malady she alluded, but was handicapped by her voluble friend.

‘ In case you might think me neglectful, I wished to explain why I cannot call on you at present, my dear. I shall always be delighted to see *you*’ (with emphasis) ‘ at Rosebank.’

Thus they parted, with further protestations of friendship on Mrs Maitland’s side, and much coldness on that of Aunt Amelia.

Thinking over the scene quietly to herself, seated in her bee-hive chair, Aunt Amelia felt deeply grieved. Mrs Maitland had often been very good to her in her adversity, and foolish and ostenta-

tious as she was, and full of meaningless chatter, she should miss her visits extremely.

How could she tell Sophia what had occurred? She could fancy her look of proud disdain; it absolutely made her tremble to think of it.

A conflict of any kind with that imperious young spirit must be avoided. Things are already bad enough without that.

Sophia could only know Edward Maitland by name; they might never meet. As to his calling, that, at any rate, was not likely.

Neither must Uncle Louis be told anything. He would only be very angry, blow up Mrs Maitland, use violent language, and blame *her*. Since Sophia had come, he had blamed her for everything.

No, she would say nothing. She would leave all to chance. (In her way, Aunt Amelia relied almost as much on chance as her husband.)

That delightful scheme about John Bauer would set everything right. If Sophia could only take to him and marry him, what a blessing it would be! But while Aunt Amelia's eyes brightened at

the thought, she dreaded lest her cold, calm resistance would not baffle her in this scheme as in everything else.

Here Mrs Winter gave a heavy sigh, and looked out of the window. It was all very sad and wretched, she thought, as she gazed pensively at the rows of bricks in the garden wall, and at the dull borders of brown earth, unenlivened by so much as a coloured leaf. Everything was against her. The comfort of her home was gone, and Sophia—at this point such a hopelessness came over her that she could not help sobbing to herself under the folds of her handkerchief.





CHAPTER XVIII.

MEANWHILE Sophia was lingering upstairs in her room. But for Uncle Louis and his flute (they played together late into the night, long after Aunt Amelia had gone to bed), she would have preferred not to come down at all.

She was used, in the long, silent hours of the hot season in India, to sit with darkened windows; everybody asleep in the verandah, and no sound to be heard but the creaking of the punkah.

And now her heart was so full that the time seemed far too short to think out all that had happened. Why had Edward Maitland not come? Would he come? If so, what would he say? Was it possible—

Alone though she is, a burning blush covers her from head to foot.

‘No, no! It is not possible!’ (She contradicts her own thoughts with loud, outspoken words.) ‘It is not possible! It was a mistake! No one could care for her. No one—no one!’

She wrung her hands piteously. All that went with the death of her poor father and ruin,—all the pleasant days when people worshipped her. Oh, why had he shot himself? If he had but lived she could willingly have borne poverty—disgrace even, with him. Now, a curse had fallen upon her. God was very cruel! What had she done to deserve it?

That tall, supple figure that stood beside her in the lane, like the world’s master,—that grave, open brow, that rare smile, bringing out the glow in a pair of grey-blue eyes, so full of meaning, was not for her! No! no! not for her! She had been a fool to think so. What he had said was the ordinary tone of English manners. Her ignorance had lent a significance to his words and looks which was not in the least warranted.

It was because she had lived so much alone with her father, and associated so little with young people of her own age, that Edward Maitland’s manner had so im-

pressed her. He, of course, had meant nothing ; he had assisted her in a moment of perplexity ; he had made her an offer of his friendship. They had not met again ; he had forgotten her.

Instead of dreaming of Maitland, she would make a change in her life. She would cease to be a burden on Uncle Louis—eating out her heart in misery. She would work.

What special work she was fitted for she could not have defined. The daughter of the almost princely resident at —— had known nothing of work but the name.

A dreadful heave, as for breath, rose in her breast : inexpressible longings came over her. She tried to evoke her pride, but no pride came. It all softened at the thought of Edward. How he had charmed her !

Then, in the same breath, she called herself a poor, humiliated creature to think of a man who had forgotten her. Yet surely, after all he had said,—after the earnest look of those eyes,—she grew hot all over as she recalled them. European as he was, might he not have taken the trouble to inquire after her ?

Day after day Sophia passed in her

room, at that side window that overlooked the trees and shrubberies of Rosebank. She even mounted on a chair and stood for hours together to see if nothing were moving under the elms bordering the drive—her heart beating violently all the time. If she could only have a glimpse of him !

That very morning, when the late daylight came a little brighter than usual, she had risen as early as she had been accustomed to do in India, and throwing up the sash, had stood shivering with cold, looking out upon that shrubbery of laurels near the house, bound in by the river.

It was a quiet, happy spot even in winter, suggesting summer shade and the fresh scent of flowers. The tall trunks of the feathering elms rose up straight like the pillars of a temple, supporting a canopy of branches, through which glimpses of the dull sky shot down. The ground, a sheet of moss and ivy, across which a path meandered into a little dell, where some marble statues guarded a carved stone seat and the entaliated border of a fountain.

Further on, deep hedges of evergreens spread out like umbrageous walls, and beyond, the smooth turf lawns, through

which flowed the river, broken by a group of large weeping-willows, that dipped their leafless branches into the flood.

Sophia could just see the swans sailing by, and make out the outlines of passing boats, an old gentleman sitting in a punt, and barges and rafts, with a rare pleasure-boat—for the weather was chilly—with gay-coloured flags dipping in the water. Surely if she watched long enough she must see Edward!

No one! no one! Nothing but the young rooks circling in the air, then swooping down in search of worms, cawing and chattering, the elder birds perched on the leafless branches over the edge of the old nests, until all flew away in dark masses, one ancient bird leading the way.

At last, chilled by the raw air, she got down from the chair and shut the window.

‘I can but die—I can but die,’ she moaned to herself, and tightly clutched the little bottle with Zebula’s charm, safe in her bosom.

The touch brought comfort. Had Zebula been there, she would have given her something to draw Edward towards her.

Zebula could make love-filters and concoct poisons. She could read the stars, and the lines of the hand. Plants and trees were full of meaning to her. They were possessed by the souls of the dead. She would have spoken to those elms and laurels, and drawn from them all manner of secrets about Edward. Sophia thought she must have offended the supreme spirit Zebula dreaded almost to mention, and that devils had been sent to torment her. Drought and blight and disease came from devils, and all manner of woe. They are only to be won by propitiation and offerings, and she had done nothing. Every wicked person at his death goes to swell the devil-legion. His evil passions are intensified in the form of a malignant and mischievous fiend.

Sophia was sure Aunt Amelia was a devil!

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At twelve o'clock there was a sound of steps outside, coming slowly down the oak staircase. The door opened and Sophia swept in. She gave a weary glance round the yellow room, as if she knew by heart all it contained, and hated it.

Aunt Amelia rose hastily from her chair, and went to meet her.

‘Are you not well, my love? You are so pale this morning.’

She asked the question hurriedly, looking anxiously into Sophia’s face.

‘Your eyes are dull too! I am sure you have slept badly.’

‘I wish, Aunt Amelia, you would not always notice my looks. It worries me!’

Sophia frowned as she spoke, and crossing over to the window, stood there, watching the clouds scudding over the grey sky.

‘Do you always have such dreadful weather in England?’ she asked. ‘It does not seem like the same world as India. When will the sun shine? It is much brighter at Rosebank—’ she was adding, but stopped herself.

‘Yes; winter is very gloomy,’ answered Mrs Winter, retreating to her bee-hive chair, and taking up her strips of coloured worsted-work. ‘One must be very happy to like it.’

A heavy sigh was Sophia’s only answer.

‘My love, it grieves me to see you so depressed. Do try and accustom yourself to your new life a little.’

A bitter smile played round Sophia's lips, and her large weary eyes travelled contemptuously up and down the room.

'I hope I have accustomed myself to it; at least I have tried to do so,' she added, more gently.

She rather wished to conciliate Aunt Amelia this morning; tired of suspense, she had resolved to ask her whether the Maitlands never called. The very thought of uttering their name brought a flush to her cheek. Why could not Aunt Amelia speak of them herself?

'Does she think she is to shut me up like a prisoner? She must be a devil!' thought Sophia.

The flush on her face deepened into an angry frown. She tapped her fingers impatiently upon the panes of glass.

Mrs Winter was silently watching her. She shook her head—then spoke,—

'It is very strange!' she said, in a low voice; 'I expected a letter this morning from my sister. I hope nothing has happened, or that that weak-eyed postboy has not lost it—he is so terribly careless! We pay him to bring the letters from Twickenham,—whether he cannot see, or what it is, I do not know; but they are constantly

lost. Sophia, my love,' she added, in the gentlest of tones, 'your aunt, Lady Danvers, ought to have written to-day about coming here. Do you not care to see her?'

Sophia did not move; but her fingers rattled more sharply on the panes. Here was this woman getting further and further away from Rosebank and the Maitlands. She hated her at that moment—as Zebula had taught her to hate all evil things. She hated herself too, for her want of courage in not asking her a direct question. Yet, somehow or other, the words died on her lips.

'Sophia!' repeated Aunt Amelia, a little louder, 'don't you hear me?'

She moved slowly round;—a dark cloud on her face—beautiful in its clear olive outlines, and marble-like skin.

'No, aunt; I do not care. Lady Danvers does not come to see me.'

A spot of red gathered on each of Mrs Winter's cheeks, the bows on her cap trembled, and her hands clutched the soft wool of the coloured stripes.

'Do, my love, remember,' her voice faltering a little with the vexation she felt, 'it was your dear father's wish that you should love your relations.'

‘Father!’ Sophia caught up the word and turned round sharply, her young face set and stern, her hands held out entreatingly. ‘No! no! Not my father! There are so few people that I can bear to name him.’

Aunt Amelia was rising with some undefined notion of clasping her in her arms. These cruel words stopped her.

‘Yet he was my own dear brother!’ she answered, retreating to her chair, utterly discomfited.

‘I know it! I know it!’ cried Sophia. ‘I am very wrong, very wicked, but I cannot help it;’ then more calmly,—‘forgive me, Aunt Amelia! you wound me without knowing it, perhaps—but you do wound me.’

She drew back, and with an abrupt movement turned again to the window. Aunt Amelia’s compassion was too much roused to resent this outburst of temper.

‘Sophia, you may be sure I never wish to wound you. I had hoped for your confidence—’ Here her soft voice almost broke, but she forced herself to continue. ‘You talk sometimes of your ayah Zebula. Can you not care for me as you did for her?’

There was no reply. Sophia was too loyal to dissemble ; her head dropped in silence.

‘Well, well, never mind ! I daresay it is my own fault. Something unlucky seems to have come to me. The truth is, I am too old, and too dull, to be a companion for you. I do my best, but I have many causes for anxiety which you do not understand.’ She stopped to suppress a sigh, then proceeded meekly,—‘But your cousin, Jane Danvers, will suit you. She is quite a girl ; and so gay, so clever !’

‘Then she will be no companion for me,’ returned Sophia sharply. ‘Jane will look down on me, now I am ruined. People in India don’t despise poor relations : in England they do.’

‘Oh, Sophia !’ cried Aunt Amelia, in a tone of reproach, ‘Jane will love you.’

‘Love me !’ Sophia gave a short, scornful laugh. ‘That is not at all likely.’

‘She will, my dear child—love you and pity you.’

‘Pity me !’ broke in Sophia, in an angry voice. ‘I want no one’s pity ! No one shall pity me !’ She raised her head, with its coronet of raven plaits. ‘I know my place. I am a humble relation, ab-

solutely dependent for my bread on the charity of my friends. That was what you wrote to me at Calcutta, Aunt Amelia! I remember. Never fear!’

‘And it is quite true,’ answered Mrs Winter, with unusual decision. ‘Remember, my poor child, that our affection is all you have left. It is my duty to say this to you. I am sure you will forgive me.’

Sophia made no reply. Her uplifted head and proud attitude seemed to say that it was very doubtful whether she intended to forgive anything.

‘Will Aunt Amelia never give me any opportunity of asking about the Maitlands?’ was her thought all this time. She reddened with vexation, as Mrs Winter, quite ignorant of what was passing in her mind, went on:—

‘My sister, Lady Danvers, is rich and influential. Her husband died many years ago and left her a handsome jointure, and a lovely place for her life. Uncle Louis and I went there once to visit her: I never was so happy. But such visits are beyond me; I have no proper clothes to appear in at my sister’s house. Jane, her daughter, inherits a separate fortune left by her grandfather; she will be very rich.

Lady Danvers is her guardian, and gives herself up to her education. Though Jane is sixteen, she is kept hard at work. My sister says she is naturally very clever, and that her intellect must be cultivated before she comes out. I am afraid Lady Danvers will overdo it, and make her ill. However, she has promised to bring her here for Christmas. It will be a great treat to her, especially as you are here. Jane is so fond of Uncle Louis. I tell you this, dear Sophia, that you may understand how much Lady Danvers can do for you. She lives in the world, you know—I do not—we have no money. It is most important Lady Danvers should like you.'

Sophia listened to all this in stony silence. Aunt Amelia, encouraged by her seeming acquiescence, continued,—

'Then there is John Bauer.' At John Bauer's name, Aunt Amelia's voice grew quite cheerful. She suddenly remembered that he was at hand, and might come in at any time; perhaps that very evening. 'I am so anxious he should please you. He will accompany you and Uncle Louis on the violoncello. He is such a good fellow.'

'Why do you want me to like this Mr

Bauer?' asked Sophia; turning round upon her aunt.

At this question, Mrs Winter felt her cheeks tingle.

'Well, Sophia'—she hesitated,—'he is Uncle Louis's nephew—a near relation.' She paused again. Sophia never took her dark eyes off her. This confused her, and her heart began to beat 'He is immensely rich—a most excellent match—the best of men.' She spoke nervously, in little abrupt sentences. 'Would it be wonderful—if—your uncle and I would like it so much. We are always talking about you, dear,—if he, John,—should be struck—'

A flash of fire leaped up in Sophia's sombre eyes.

'Do you mean struck by me?' she asked imperiously. 'Then, pray, beg this gentleman not to come. I shall ask Uncle Louis to forbid him—I shall not be civil to him! Understand, Aunt Amelia, and tell Uncle Louis also, to understand that you must make no matrimonial projects for me.'

'Sophia! Sophia! you treat me like a stranger!' cried Mrs Winter, for the first time waking into momentary anger.

‘Neither Uncle Louis nor I can forbid John Bauer the house;—he comes and goes when he pleases. No, Sophia, you have no right to ask that. You are very perverse; you care for nobody; you might have waited until you had met.’

‘On the contrary,’ replied Sophia, with provoking calm, ‘it is better to say at once that I will have nothing to do with him. It will save misapprehension. I know my place, Aunt Amelia. I am ready to work for my bread. But in this I am my own mistress. I do not mean to marry.’

‘Not mean to marry!’ ejaculated Mrs Winter, too much aghast to notice anything else. (How she repented having mentioned John Bauer’s name. She had roused Sophia’s temper.) ‘Why! it was always intended you should marry. Your father—’

‘No; not now! I do not intend to marry. I can quite understand your motive, Aunt Amelia.’ As she said this, Sophia seemed to stiffen into stone. ‘You do not like me. You wish to get rid of me! I promise you, I shall not trouble you long.’

‘Trouble me!’ repeated Aunt Amelia,

too much stunned at first to understand. 'My beloved brother's child! I have not deserved this! Indeed—indeed I have not!'

At this point poor Mrs Winter utterly broke down. All the sorrow that had weighed upon her since Sophia came seemed to engulf her in an abyss of hopeless misery. She covered her face with her hands; then quickly wiping away the fast-falling tears, she made a desperate effort to master her feelings.

It would not do. Sophia's cruel words had struck her like a knife.

'Forgive me, dear,' she murmured. 'Forgive me. I feel a little unwell. I think I will go out and take a walk. I am so nervous—the air will do me good. Good-bye, good-bye.' And she hastily left the room.

As Sophia watched the manner of Mrs Winter's exit, a curl of scorn rose to her lips. Her disdainful eyes followed the fragile little figure in its progress to the door. Then her wrath exploded.

'John Bauer, indeed! So that is your plan. I have no money, and you want to get rid of me. You are a false, designing woman, Aunt Winter, with all your soft

ways! I thought so. Zebula found you out. John Bauer, indeed!’ And with rapid steps she paced up and down the room.

Gradually, however, her pace slackened; —the flush on her face paled down, and she began to look with curious glances at the pictures, which, spite of the gloomy day, shone out in rich, subdued tints.

The subjects were as strange to her as though they had been glimpses into another planet.

The cool greys and browns and blues of the Dutch school—(Mr Winter, naturally, was always well supplied with Dutch pictures)—the peaceful delineation of home life—the running stream, beside which rode a solitary horseman—the mill-dam with its wheel and foam of mist—the patch of bosky wood—the dim, dreamy distance, melting into the sky—the groups of men and women, in thick puffed-out clothes and broad-brimmed hats, stolidly contemplating each other—a fat-faced lady in white satin, a red ribbon in her hair, performing on a spinet—a cavalier beside her, a red, feather in his felt hat, and a countenance round, common-place, impassive—of all this misty, dimly-lighted world, Sophia knew nothing; but its peacefulness soothed her.

As her eyes wandered eagerly up and down the walls, they fixed themselves on a large painting in an elaborately-carved frame, placed conspicuously in the centre of a panel, on which 'San Sebastiano' was written in gold letters on the dark gilding.

The figure stood out life-like from the canvas, pierced by arrows to the stem of a tree.

Who San Sebastiano was, Sophia had no idea; but the clear, transparent flesh-tints, and that solemn, suffering look in the beautiful upturned eyes, riveted her like a spell.

As long as Mrs Winter was present, Sophia would not for worlds have allowed herself to appear interested in anything; and it so happened that she had never been alone in the yellow drawing-room before.

Now, all her artistic tastes were awakened. She did not conceal her delight.

Sophia was an unconscious artist, but in music alone her natural powers had been cultivated.

One by one she took up and minutely examined the gems that lay about among skeins of darning thread and tape and

buttons and discoloured bills, and she knelt to examine a Dresden tea-service placed on a low shelf, with portraits of smiling ladies, their piled-up, powdered heads like the petals of snowy flowers.

‘How gay they all look!’ thought Sophia. ‘They must have had happy lives!’

Continuing her inspection, she handled the blue Chinese plates, as big as chargers, with great dabs of red and blue paint, like Cashmere shawls, and touched the jars standing on the carpet, filled with Aunt Amelia’s best pot-pourri, the rose-leaf perfume of which always clung about her.

‘How can Uncle Louis be poor when he possesses such treasures?’ she asked herself.

Then she stared at the Dutch tiles that shut in the grate, with their quaint groups of Egyptian Pharaoh, in royal robes of cobalt, wringing his hands,—Moses stand before him, cobalt also, but more freely sprinkled with white, as became an Israelite and a lawgiver. All this was very wonderful.

She took up Aunt Amelia’s stripes of knitting lying on the rug, eyed them first curiously, then, in a sudden fit of anger,

flung them on the floor. A little ashamed of herself, she sauntered off, more by instinct than by reflection, to the piano, where she seated herself, and began to think.

The pale face in the picture of St Sebastian followed her. Should she die with mournful, upturned orbs like those? Die alone—quite alone; with no one to close her eyes, or fold the shroud around her?

Her fingers, meanwhile, wandered unconsciously over the keys,—vaguely at first,—striking a few chords, that sounded so penetrating, so appalling, they echoed in the room like the voice of a fiend; the chords followed by a dash of crashing harmonies, long wailing arpeggios, and musical sighs, dying out in quaint little shakes and runs and trills.

It was no settled theme. She played as the spirit within prompted, passing from major to minor; but with one long, earnest keynote, steadfast in all the changes,—the note of her own soul.

A flash of delight came into her face as she felt the power of the instrument under her hands;—the music rolling forth, free as a great river which overbursts its bounds.

Little by little she grew absolutely absorbed by the subtle charms that her imagination created, gazing up at the St Sebastian, with that holy, martyred look, the arrows planted in his bleeding breast.

Yes, she suffered too! Many sharp arrows pierced her soul!

Now her theme melted into a melody—simple, soft, touching;—the motive of a sonata which her father had loved.

Yes! she should like to die like that—serene in the flames of torture, rapt in the bliss of the unseen!

Since Maitland had forsaken her, all her thoughts were of death; her hand was always clutching the little filigree bottle in her bosom, Zebula's last gift.

Then her fingers dashed up and down the board in successive octaves, into the untutored rhythm of an Indian dance. But in all she played there was a wild, passionate longing,—a yearning, uneasy sense of ungratified desire, reflecting itself in her large black eyes, so sad, so fierce, so full of love, so redolent of hate.

As she played, the room in which she sat receded, the leaden skies outside vanished.

The vast plains of India rose before her—sun-baked, brown, arid—shut in by giant mountain ranges, folding themselves up in mist, breaking into tints of lilac and purple.

In the west, a blood-red sun dropped into a tawny volcano of cloud. She breathed the vapours that swept by her like the breath of a furnace.

A grove of palm trees shook its huge fronds in the sultry air; the outline of cactus hedges fell dark upon the earth; the stifling fragrance of champak and jasmine, and roses of Saadi of every shade (from the splendour of the full-blown Bengal to the tiny button, which trails upon the earth); tall sandal-wood trees made the air heavy with their perfume. Avenues of majestic banyans, with broad, smooth leaves, each tree a forest in itself, rose up in the hot air; monkeys swung from branch to branch; and parrots, like living flowers, chattered among the coral creepers, with stiff crimson pod. Then the scene changed to a bungalow on the green plateau of a mountain ravine at Simla, where she spent the hot season, buried in tree-ferns and tamarinds, its over-spreading verandahs shaded with great

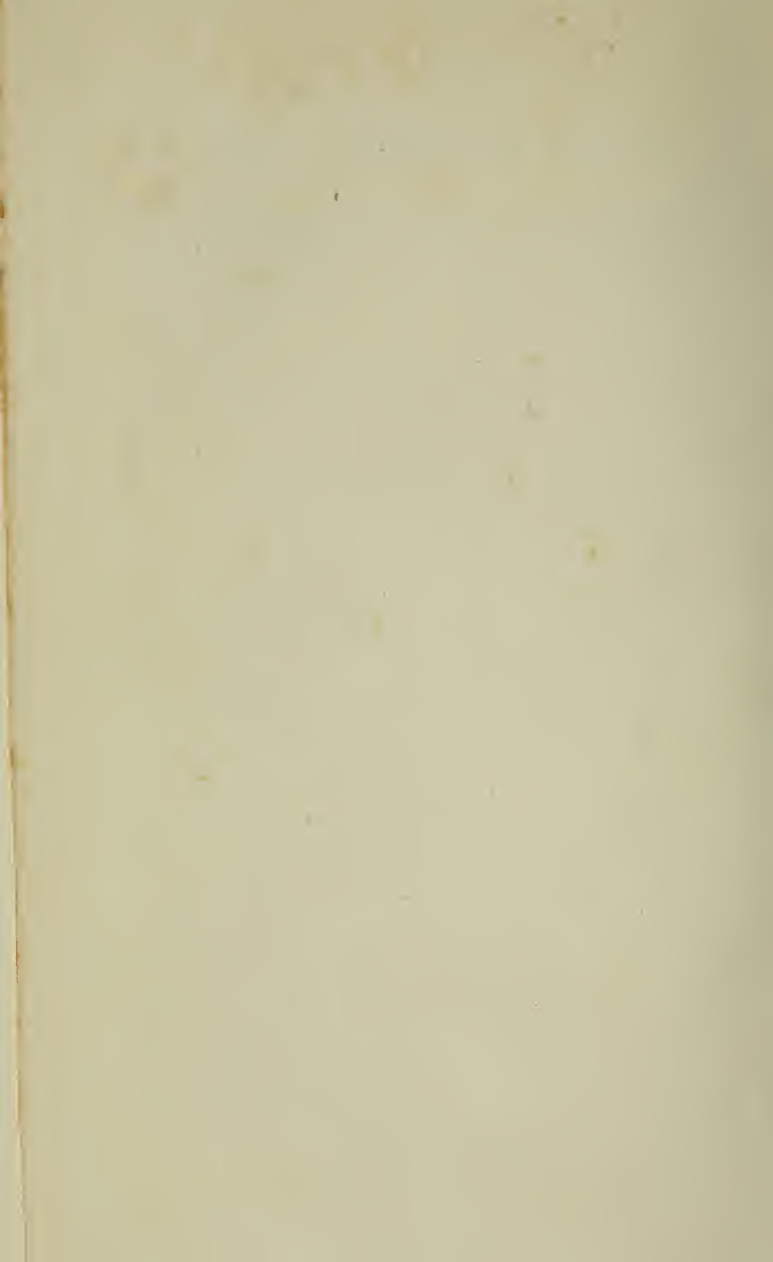
plantain trees, and gaudy-leaved exotics flinging themselves from bough to bough in the damp air. Within, her father lay stretched on a divan, his calm face veiled in sleep ; Zebula, at her feet, whispering, as was her wont, long tales of charms and enchantments, to pass away the sultry hours of the day.

Death, ruin, England were but dreams—evil dreams, of the night. For one instant, under the spell of the music, she forgot even Maitland, and lived in her native land once more.

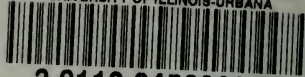
A slight sound roused her. She ceased playing, and turned round.

Maitland was standing motionless in the open doorway, his eyes riveted upon her !

END OF VOL. I.



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